

GUIDELINES FOR ADULTS

Self-protection for adults

When a severe event hits a community, it creates a condition of high sensitivity in the individual and the collectivity. A critical event and an ongoing situation like the Coronavirus pandemic can cause particularly intense emotional reactions, which can interfere with people's functional capacity both during the exposure to the event and afterwards.

From the moment of exposure until today, the following phases can follow:

- Acute phase (sense of extraneousness and derealisation, sense of not being ourselves, of not feeling our body, confusion, space and temporal disorientation). Shock is part of the acute physiological reaction to stress and it is a mechanism that allows maintaining a certain distance to the event, which is necessary to absorb the impact and maybe to deal with the initial needs.
- Emotional impact phase: we can feel a wide variety of emotions like sadness, guilt, rage, fear, confusion and anxiety. Somatic reactions can also develop, like physical disorders (headache, gastrointestinal issues, etc.), and problems in finding a state of calm.
- Coping phase: we start wondering about what happened to find explanations, using all our resources (*"Why did it happen? What can I do? Why now?..."*).

Here are the most common reactions that might last for a period of a couple of days or weeks:

- Intrusive thoughts: recurring images, involuntary and intrusive memories (*flashbacks*).
- Avoidance: failed attempt to avoid related thoughts or feelings. Impossibility of approaching what refers to the event/the situation.
- Depressed mood and/or persistent negative thoughts. Negative beliefs and expectations on ourselves or the world (*for instance, starting to have negative thoughts like: "the world is totally dangerous"*).
- Persistent and irrational feelings of guilt towards ourselves or the others, for having caused or elicited the traumatic event or for its consequences, especially after having had direct experience of contact or infection.
- Feelings of guilt for having survived/not been infected
- Persistent negative emotions related to the trauma/threatening situation (*for example, feeling fear, horror, rage, guilt, shame even for a long time and when the situation seems to be getting better*).
- Difficulty in sleeping and/or eating: difficulties to fall asleep, frequent awakenings and nightmares, or hypersomnia, which means sleeping for many more hours).
- Strong loss of interest in pleasant activities.
- Being overwhelmed by the daily tasks and by restructuring daily activities, feeling paralysed.

There are marked individual differences in the appearance, duration and intensity of these reactions.

WHAT WE CAN DO

- Know how to recognise our own emotional reactions and the difficulties that we might have.
- **Do not deny your feelings but remember that it is normal for everyone to have emotional reactions because of such an unexpected, unforeseeable and threatening event/situation.**
- Be able to monitor our physical and emotional reactions.
- Remember that we are not alone, but – although we are not in contact physically – we are part of a system and an organisation that can support and help, also emotionally and psychologically.
- Talk about the critical event/situation, helping each other in releasing the emotional tension.
- Respect others' emotional reactions and action/behaviour, even when they are completely different and difficult to understand from our point of view.
- Try to keep in touch, even through virtual channels, with people in your lives. Re-establish a somehow predictable daily routine.
- Ask for help from people you trust, possibly choosing who gives you a better feeling of familiarity and safety.
- Take some time to recover, pay attention to your needs and keep the distance from the event/the situation or the activities connected to it (sleeping, resting, thinking, crying, being with our loved ones, etc.).
- Protect your emotional balance, accessing supporting services.
- Access, when and if possible, psychological support focused on reprocessing traumatic memories and reactions resulting from the event/the situation.
- Limit the access to media to once or twice a day. Exposed people need to find a meaning for what happened and, for this reason they spend a lot of time searching for news; nevertheless, it is necessary to protect ourselves from excessive exposure.
- Prefer the official channels as source of information, like the World Health Organisation <https://www.who.int/> and its guidelines on hygiene practices.
- Remember that a positive attitude and avoiding catastrophic thoughts helps yourselves and the community.