



Bystander Resource Guide

Support for those who step in to help.

Table of contents



Introduction 3

Normal responses after stress 4

Coping after an incident..... 9

Common questions 10

Local supports 12



Introduction

Taking action during a life-threatening emergency is a courageous and often overwhelming experience. Whether you have formal training or not, stepping in to help can leave a deep emotional imprint. For many, it's an unexpected moment that stands out from everyday life - intense, stressful, and sometimes surreal.

Everyone processes these moments differently. Some people feel a surge of adrenaline that helps them focus and act quickly. Others describe their mind racing to recall what they've learned whether through training, life experience, or even scenes from TV or movies. In those moments, we do the best we can with the tools we have.

Once things settle, emotional responses can surface. It's not unusual to feel unsettled, shaken, or even to question your actions. Feelings like confusion, sadness, fear, or guilt are all valid, and they can show up unexpectedly. Even if the outcome was positive, the emotional impact may still linger.

This guide was developed to help you navigate those reactions. By offering clear information, addressing common concerns, and pointing you toward helpful resources, we hope to support your recovery - on your terms and at your own pace.

Normal responses after stress

It's completely normal to have strong physical and emotional responses after witnessing or helping in an emergency. Your body and mind were under pressure, and it may take time for you to recover.

Everyone responds differently - and that's okay. The following pages offer a guide to some common responses you might experience in the hours, days, and weeks after the event, and some insight as to why they happen.

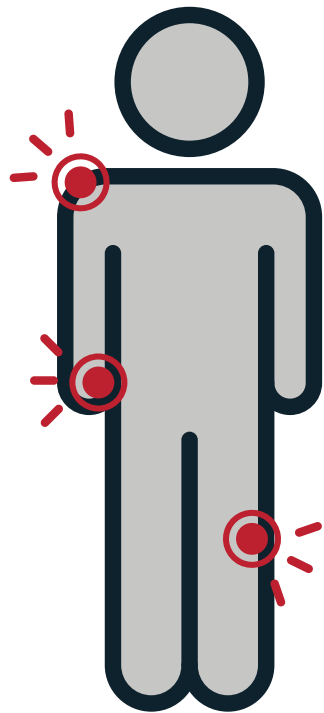


Emotional responses

Emotional reactions happen because your brain is trying to make sense of a sudden, intense event. Feelings like fear, guilt, sadness, or even pride are all part of your mind's natural way of processing what happened.

Physical Responses

Your body reacts automatically to stress by releasing adrenaline and other hormones. This can cause symptoms like a fast heartbeat, shaking, sweating, or feeling unusually tired - all part of your body's built-in survival system.



Normal responses after stress

Hours after...

Your body is coming down from a surge of adrenaline. That's the hormone that helps us react quickly in emergencies. It can make you feel wired, shaky, or even numb at first.

Common physical responses:

- Rapid heartbeat or breathing
- Sweating or chills
- Trembling or muscle tension
- Upset stomach or nausea
- Feeling exhausted or completely alert

Common emotional responses:

- Shock or disbelief – “Did that really happen?”
- Feeling dazed, spaced out, or confused
- Emotional numbness, or sudden crying or laughing
- Relief that it's over

Why this happens:

Your body was in “survival mode” - focused on reacting quickly, not processing emotions. Once the emergency ends, your body starts to calm down, but your mind may still be catching up.

Normal responses after stress

Days after...

As your adrenaline levels drop, your brain starts trying to process the experience. You may find the event keeps coming back to mind, and you might feel more emotional or unsettled than usual.

Common physical responses:

- Trouble sleeping (waking up suddenly or having vivid dreams)
- Changes in appetite
- Headaches or tension
- Feeling tired even after rest

Common emotional responses:

- Replay of the event in your mind “What could I have done differently?”
- Feelings of guilt, sadness, fear, or anger
- Feeling jumpy or easily startled
- Wanting to be alone or feeling disconnected from others

Why this happens:

Your brain is trying to make sense of what happened - especially if it was unexpected, chaotic, or upsetting. These thoughts and emotions are part of your system's natural way of trying to understand and cope.

Normal responses after stress

Weeks after...

Most people start to feel better with time, especially if they talk about the experience and take care of themselves. However, some feelings can linger longer than expected, and that's normal too.

Common physical responses:

- Ongoing tiredness or low energy
- Trouble concentrating
- Muscle tightness or aches from tension

Common emotional responses:

- Continued self-doubt or questioning your actions
- Avoiding reminders of the event (even places, people, or sounds)
- Mood swings or emotional ups and downs
- Feeling proud, but also uneasy or anxious

Why this happens:

Big experiences take time to heal from, especially if you've never been through something like this before. Sometimes, strong feelings or memories can surface weeks later when you least expect them -and that's a normal part of emotional recovery.

Coping after an incident

Helping in a crisis can take a toll, even if you felt calm at the time. Afterward, it's important to give yourself space to recover - emotionally, mentally, and physically. Self-care isn't selfish; it's how you allow your body and mind to come back to balance after being under intense pressure.

Coping strategies you can try:

- **Talk it out:** Share your experience with someone you trust - a friend, family member, or peer.
- **Rest and recharge:** Get good sleep, eat regular meals, and take time to relax.
- **Write it down:** Journaling can help you sort through your thoughts and emotions.
- **Stay active:** Gentle movement like walking or stretching can reduce tension.
- **Avoid overload:** Give yourself permission to take breaks from news, work, or busy environments.
- **Healthy habits:** Deep breathing, mindfulness, or grounding exercises can help calm your nervous system.

Give yourself time. Most people start to feel better as days and weeks go by - and reaching out for help is a strength, not a weakness

Common questions

1. Did I do the right thing?

Yes - taking action to help someone in an emergency is always the right thing to do. Whether you gave CPR, called 911, or just stayed with the person, your actions made a difference. Even small efforts can bring comfort and save lives.

2. What if I made it worse?

It's natural to worry, but most of the time, doing something is far better than doing nothing. Emergency responders are trained to take over when they arrive, and they rely on bystanders to do their best until then. Legally, Good Samaritan laws protect people who try to help in good faith.

3. Why do I feel so emotional after the event?

Strong emotions are completely normal after a high-stress situation. Your brain and body went into survival mode, and now they're trying to process what happened. Even trained professionals feel this way - it's part of being human.

4. Can I find out what happened to the person I helped?

In most cases, privacy laws prevent paramedics or hospitals from sharing details about the person you helped. That can be hard, especially if you're hoping for closure. Try to focus on what you did - you showed up, and that matters.

5. What should I do if I keep thinking about it?

It's common for memories to come up over and over again for a while. This usually fades with time. If the thoughts are very upsetting or affecting your daily life, talking to a professional or support line can really help.

6. Why didn't I do more?

In the moment, you acted with the information, instincts, and ability you had - and that's enough. Emergencies are overwhelming, and no one responds perfectly. It's normal to wish you'd done more, but the fact that you stepped in at all is courageous and meaningful.

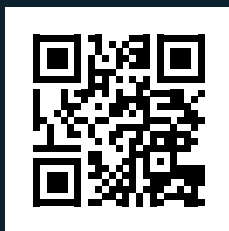
Local **supports**

Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) Durham

Provides various mental health services,
including counseling and support programs.

Website:

cmhadurham.ca

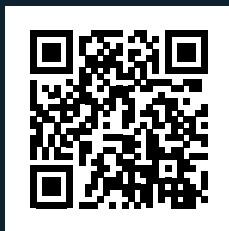


COPE Mental Health Program (Community Care Durham)

Offers group programs focused on emotional support, stressmanagement, and coping skills.

Website:

**communitycare
durham.on.ca**



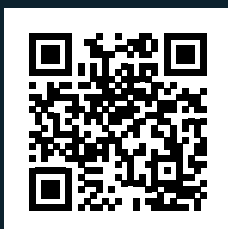
Local **supports**

Distress Centre Durham

Provides 24-hour telephone support,
including crisis management and
emotional support.

Website:

distresscentredurham.com

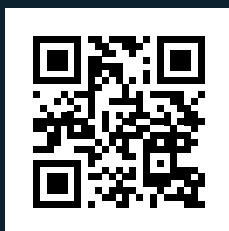


Durham Mental Health Services (DMHS)

Offers 24/7 crisis support for individuals aged 16 and over.

Website:

dmhs.ca



Thank you for stepping in.

In moments of crisis, it takes courage to act - and you did. Whether you feel strong, shaken, or somewhere in between, your effort was meaningful.



Give yourself
time to heal

905-665-6313

durham.ca/health

**4040 Anderson Street,
Whitby, ON L1R 3P6**

**Durham Health Connection Line
1-800-841-2729 or 905-668-2020**

Dial 311 (within regional limits)



If you require this information in an accessible format, contact 1-800-841-2729.

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**HEALTH
DEPARTMENT**

