

# We Are Expats, We Are Strong: Experiencing trauma while away from home

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Expatriates tend to be tough, resilient people. As expats, you and your family have made a home and a social network as newcomers in an unfamiliar environment. You function autonomously while away from your family and friends back home. You have overcome the challenges of cultural adaptation and stresses of relocation. Yet, all of this can be turned upside down and called into question when a traumatic incident or disaster occurs.

Traumatic events, such as being a victim of criminal violence or a diagnosis with a serious illness, bring into focus that you are away from home. Disasters, political turmoil, and terrorist activities remind you that you are living in a culture different from your own. Your host country may not feel like a safe and secure place any more, and the local cultural way of managing the situation may seem difficult to understand and to take in stride.

Meanwhile, traumatic events that happen back home may make you feel helpless and isolated, as you cannot be present with those affected to support them or assess the situation with your own eyes.

## Understanding traumatic events

To absorb the impact of individual and large-scale traumatic incidents, it is important that you understand the common emotional responses to these kinds of situations. If you do not understand or acknowledge these reactions, they may impair your decision-making and put you at higher risk of misinterpreting your symptoms as pathological

in some way. Lack of understanding can go hand in hand with a lack of compassion from outsiders, which can condemn you or others to suffer in silence.

A critical or traumatic incident is an event that exceeds your normal ability to cope. These events are generally unpredictable and out of your personal control. It may be more appropriate to call these kinds of events “extreme events,” to help clarify that it is the nature of the event that creates the personal impact and not weakness or shortcoming of the person affected.

Extreme events have ripple effects that go well beyond the individuals directly involved. Friends, family, community, and remote witnesses are also affected. People can be vicariously traumatized – for instance, through media exposure or from meeting people who were part of an event. Our humanity ties us together, and when we are confronted by human suffering, we cannot help but react emotionally. This is a good thing and not a weakness.

## Understanding the impact of extreme events

Media coverage of disasters and their human impact has helped to create awareness of and compassion for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Although it is common for people to be symptomatic immediately after the experience of an extreme event, in reality only a small percentage of people develop long-term PTSD.

That being said, people do experience a range of symptoms as a normal response to an

abnormal situation. After initial disbelief and numbness, it is common for people to manifest symptomatic behavior in one or more of the following four areas:

- Physical, including:
  - various aches and pains
  - impaired immune system
  - disruption of eating or sleeping patterns
  - dreams and nightmares
  - irritability
  - restlessness/need to take action (such as to pack up and leave, or to become involved)
- Cognitive functioning, including:
  - increased distractibility
  - difficulty concentrating
  - obsessive thinking
  - need for continuous information gathering
- Personal wellbeing, including:
  - loss of purpose
  - sense of isolation
  - withdrawal from relationships
  - the need to help others
- Emotional, including:
  - strong, seemingly random emotions that spill over or are difficult to contain
  - anger – generalized anger, anger at the victims, at the universe, at the government, at your neighbor, or your spouse
  - depression

- anxiety/fear – often fear of reoccurrence of the event
- survivor guilt – wondering why you escaped while others did not

These symptoms commonly fade over time. For distinct, contained events, this period is usually six to eight weeks. For events with a long aftermath, or after successive events close in time, symptoms can take longer to fade.

Although it is normal to have a reaction to an unexpected extreme event, each person's reaction is unique. Many factors influence the intensity of the symptoms and how you show distress (as well as how you cope). Cultural norms and values influence how the event is given meaning, as well as what are considered appropriate expressive emotions. Personal temperament, gender, and age can also play a role. Furthermore, historical and current circumstances influence your interpretation and vulnerability to the trauma. For instance: If you were already under a lot of day-to-day stress before the event, the cumulative stress may leave you more vulnerable. Taking into account the factors above, it should be clear

that there is no right or wrong way to react to trauma.

### Experiencing a traumatic event as an expat living away from home

The unique circumstances of expats living away from home also contribute to how you will be affected and how you cope with an extreme event. Several factors are relevant:

- Time in the host country: New arrivals to a country (less than a year) may still be going through their initial cultural adaptation and culture shock. The stress and effort involved in cultural adaptation and creating a new life in your host country may leave you more vulnerable. You may experience more intense symptoms and culture shock. Returning home may seem to be a good solution. Although each person must assess this for themselves, it is never recommended to make life-changing decisions while in crisis or under duress.

Under distress and crisis, people go back to their most deeply rooted cultural values and beliefs. Cultural differences become apparent, while the ability to tolerate and compensate for differences is lowered. Even long-term expats can re-experience culture shock, anger, and bewilderment with their host culture. Remind yourself that this is normal, take strength from your cultural values, and try to suspend culturally based judgment of others.

- Access to resources: The support resources available in your host country may not be readily accessible to you or culturally suited to your needs. Additionally, you may or may not have a trusted social network that can provide support to you. Community and relationships are key to resilience and effective coping. Seek out and spend time with the people who are important to you. You may choose to share your feelings and experience verbally or just take comfort from each other's company.



- Relationships with people back home: To succeed in your host country, you will inevitably have adopted some of the local cultural values and behaviors. People back home may not understand your assessment of the situation or your reactions. During crisis, expats often experience pressure from friends and family to return. Be patient – they mean well. Reassure them and help them see things from your perspective. Talk with them about their concerns.
- Evacuation: Whether to evacuate/come back home is one of the hardest decisions to make after a traumatic event, especially in certain situations, like if you have concerns for your children's welfare. This decision can be life-changing and needs careful consideration. It must be based on the best information available. Your decision will be influenced by objective information and your initial emotional response to the events. Seek out a limited

number of trusted resources for objective information, and avoid information overload. In your emotional assessment, avoid getting stuck in catastrophic thinking. Research shows that counting your blessings and recognizing small positive events each day really is effective in dealing with negative feelings and coping effectively with challenges.

If you have to evacuate, work toward closure:

- Take the time to review your experiences to date and take an inventory of all the good ones – and lessons you learned – that you will be bringing home with you.
- Make sure to maintain social and work relationships, with an eye to the future – be in touch again after you leave.
- Make a list of unfinished lessons, hopes, and goals you had for the assignment. Consider what you can do to create closure or to achieve the goal when you get back home or to your new destination.

## Fostering resilience

Resilience is a way of life that involves vision, a sense of purpose, and community. Resilient people anticipate change, can respond quickly, and solve problems in response. As an expat, you have had a unique opportunity to confront stress, distress, and change. Take confidence from your proven abilities, be compassionate with yourself and others in crisis, and apply your strengths.

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