



ASSIST-U YOUR EAP 800.750.5595

How you can cope

helping you face traumatic events

A tragedy, death, serious injury, hostage situation or threatening situation: these are traumatic events or critical incidents. People who respond to emergencies often encounter them. Sometimes an event is so traumatic that emergency responders experience significant stress reactions.

This brochure contains information and ideas that will help you cope with the effects of a critical incident or traumatic event. The most important thing to remember is you are not alone, your friends and family -- and professional guidance -- are there for you.

Emotional aftershocks

Even after the event, you may experience strong emotional or physical reactions. It is common, in fact normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have gone through a horrible event.

Emotional aftershocks -- or stress reactions -- can appear immediately after the traumatic event, a few hours or a few days later. In some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear.

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last days, weeks or months. Depending on the severity of the event, they may last even longer.

With the understanding and support of loved ones, stress reactions pass quickly. Occasionally, the traumatic event is just too powerful for a person to manage, and professional assistance from a counselor may be beneficial.

Some signs and signals of stress reaction:

Physical

Chills, thirst, fatigue, nausea, fainting, twitches, vomiting, dizziness, weakness, chest pain, headaches, elevated blood pressure, rapid heart rate, muscle tremors, shock symptoms, grinding teeth, visual difficulties, profuse sweating, difficulty breathing -- any of these symptoms may indicate the need for medical evaluation. When in doubt, call a doctor.

Thinking Skills

Confusion, nightmares, uncertainty, suspiciousness, intrusive images, blaming self or others, poor problem solving, poor abstract thinking, poor attention and decision making, poor concentration and memory, disorientation of time, place or person, difficulty identifying objects or people, heightened or lowered alertness, increased or decreased awareness or surroundings.

Emotional

Fear, guilt, grief, panic, denial, anxiety, agitation, irritability, depression, intense anger, apprehension, emotional shock, emotional outbursts, feeling overwhelmed, loss of emotional control, inappropriate emotional response.

Behavioral

Withdrawal, antisocial acts, inability to rest, intensified pacing, erratic movements, change in social activity, change in speech patterns, loss or increase in appetite, hyper-alert to environment, increased alcohol consumption, change in usual communications.

Spiritual

Anger at God, questioning of basic beliefs, withdrawal from place of worship, faith practices and rituals seem empty, loss of meaning and purpose, uncharacteristic religious involvement, sense of isolation from God, anger at clergy.

How to respond to a stress reaction

- Within the first 24 - 48 hours, alternate periods of appropriate physical exercise with relaxation to alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Structure your time - keep busy.
- You are normal, and you are having normal reactions - don't label yourself crazy.
- Talk to people - talk can be the most therapeutic medicine.
- Be wary of numbing the pain with alcohol or drugs. You don't need to complicate this with a substance abuse problem.
- Reach out to others - people do care.
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- Spend time with friends, family and colleagues.
- Help your coworkers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel bad.
- Keep a journal and write your way through those sleepless hours.
- Realize that those around you are also under stress.
- Don't make any big life changes.
- Make as many daily life decisions as possible that give you a feeling of control over your life; i.e., if someone asks you what you want to eat, answer them even if you are not sure.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal, so don't try to fight them. They'll decrease over time and become less painful.
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals - even if you don't feel like it.

How family and friends can help

- Listen carefully.
- Spend time with the traumatized person.
- Offer assistance and a listening ear, even if they have not asked for help.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Help with everyday tasks such as cleaning and cooking, care for the family and minding the children.
- Give them some private time.
- Don't take their anger or other negative feelings personally.
- Don't tell them they are "lucky it wasn't worse" - traumatized people are not consoled by such statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry this has happened to them and you want to help.