

HELPING YOU TO COPE WITH TRAUMA AND CRISIS

You have been affected by an abnormal event and the incident will have a very real presence in your life. Everyone involved, your family, your co-workers, the community in general, will be affected in some way. Increased stress may interfere with your day to day life.

The experience may have left you shaken and worried about the future. "Getting back to normal" can be a difficult process after such an experience.

Learning to recognise the normal reactions and emotions that occur following an abnormal event can help you to understand and feel more at ease with those feelings. This in turn can help in adjusting to what happened.

WHAT ARE SOME COMMON REACTIONS TO TRAUMA?

Shock - disbelief at what has happened. Numbness - the event may seem unreal, like a dream.

Fears - of damage to yourself, or death, of a recurrence of the event. Awareness of personal vulnerability. Panicky irrational feelings or other apparently unrelated fears.

Anger - at who caused it or "allowed it to happen". At the injustice and senselessness of it all - generalised anger and irritability.

Sadness - about human destruction, and losses of every kind. For loss of the belief that the world is safe and predictable.

Helplessness and shame - for having been exposed as helpless, "emotional" and needing others, for not having reacted as you would have wished.

EFFECTS ON BEHAVIOUR

The effects can be expressed in many ways and in various combinations. You may experience some of the following:

Tension - more easily startled, general agitation - physical or mental.

Sleep disturbances - inability to sleep, thoughts that prevent sleep, replaying the incident.

Dreams and nightmares - of the incident or other vivid and frightening events.

Fearfulness - of the place, or reminders of the incident.

Intrusive memories, feelings and flashbacks - interfere with concentration, daily life, and attempts to shut them out leads to deadening of feelings and thoughts.

Irritability and social withdrawal - frequent mood swings and a need to be alone.

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Depression - about the event or past events. Non-specific depression.

Physical sensations - tiredness, breathing difficulties, headaches, tense muscles, aches and pains, loss of appetite, loss of sexual interest, nausea, diarrhoea or constipation, and many other symptoms.

HOW LONG WILL THESE REACTIONS LAST?

These reactions are common. Expressing them allows nature to heal. They usually only last for a short period of time and gradually diminish over the first few weeks. Different reactions may be dominant as time goes by.

These physical and emotional symptoms are normal. They develop in people facing stress, threat or loss and are responses which help the person adapt. They can be, however, unpleasant or distressing to those affected, and their families.

FOR YOURSELF

Using some of the following hints may help to alleviate the emotional pain associated with a traumatic event:

- Make sure you have plenty of sleep
- Eat a variety of good fresh food (vegetables, fruit, etc).
- Exercise regularly - e.g., walking, swimming
- Talk to family, friends, or workmates. It is important not to isolate yourself
- Keep yourself occupied with work, a hobby, sport or family activities
- Cut down on cigarettes, coffee and alcohol
- Don't tell yourself you "should" be coping better, as this just increases the pressure on you
- It is normal to feel stressed after emergencies and disturbing incidents

If the symptoms described above are severe or if they last longer than six weeks, you may benefit from counselling.

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