

Taking Care of Yourself Emotionally

Coping with Post-Traumatic Stress

What Is A Trauma?

A trauma is an event that fundamentally threatens a sense of safety and well being. It may be literally life threatening – such as a serious crime or disaster. Or it may be an on-going, chronic situation, such as job loss or lengthy illness. It is shocking and changes the way someone sees himself or herself in the world.

What Happens After A Traumatic Event?

After a traumatic event – sometimes for weeks or months after – people continue to experience emotional reactions. These are *normal responses* to living through an emergency, major loss, or tragedy. Some of these reactions may last just a few days or weeks, some for months or occasionally longer, depending on the severity of the event and its impact on a particular person. With understanding and support, these stress reactions will pass more quickly. Some of these normal reactions include:

- upsetting memories or thoughts about the event
- numbness
- irritability
- fatigue
- anxiety/helpless feelings
- difficulty concentrating
- fearfulness
- depression
- anger
- grief
- disrupted sleep, nightmares
- appetite changes
- hyperactivity
- being easily startled
- guilt

What You Can Do

There are many things you can do to reduce these stress reactions. Some of them may seem to contradict each other. It is important to find a time and a place for both. Just as your reactions can vary greatly, so can what helps. Talk and listen to one another. Allow yourself to recount and talk about the experience. Each time the experience is told you

process what has happened. The uncomfortable feelings will gradually diminish with each re-telling. Anxieties about the future and about safety will also diminish when you allow yourself to talk openly about your fears and concerns. Give yourself time to grieve and cry.

Other important things to try can be:

- Structure your time. Keep busy.
- Be aware of numbing the pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol; ultimately these solutions won't help. They will create more problems.
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- Spend time with others
- Help others as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they're doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel out of sorts, nervous, or blue. You've been through an ordeal.
- Keep a journal. Write when you can't sleep.
- Do things that feel good to you.
- Try engaging in hard exercise, yoga, stretching or massage.
- Realize that those around you are under stress too and try to be patient.
- Don't make big life changes.
- Do make as many daily decisions as possible that will give you a feeling of control over your life. For instance, if someone asks you what you want to eat, answer them even if you're not sure.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal. 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.
- Give yourself time to reflect on the meaning of life. A trusted spiritual adviser or clergy person can be helpful.
- Allow yourself to make plans for the future.

A Word About Children

When a parent has been traumatized, children worry about him or her. They need reassurance that you are safe and will still be able to take care of them. It is best to provide that reassurance. Be careful not to frighten them with more details about what has happened to you than they can handle. It may be helpful to inform other caretakers, such as teachers or childcare providers.

Children who are traumatized are also susceptible to these responses and may show anxieties, fear, worry, behavior and school problems, sleep problems, and possibly bed-wetting. Their play activities and fantasies may show that the event continues to bother them. Some children may appear to “regress” to younger behavior. It is best to allow that to happen for a time and to give them the extra comforting and nurturing they need. Don't worry – they will soon return to their normal behavior. Allow children to talk

about their fears. Reassure them. Tell them that it is OK and normal for them to be feeling these things and that you are doing whatever you can to ensure their safety. Allow them to talk as much as they want about the event and to continue to ask questions about it.

When To Seek Professional Help

Occasionally, the event may be so painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be helpful. This does not imply emotional weakness on the part of the person. It simply means that the particular event was just too powerful for the person to manage by him/herself. Often, one or two talks with a counselor will help. Some common signs of stress reaction – especially chest pain or difficulty breathing – should be checked with a medical person. Talking with a counselor specializing in trauma reactions can help diminish other persistent signs of stress. You should consider seeking further help if:

- You continue to have memories or images of the event that intrude on your thoughts.
- You continue to have nightmares or difficulty sleeping.
- You find yourself feeling uncontrollably angry, constantly depressed, or moody.
- Your work performance is affected.
- Your relationships are suffering or people keep commenting on how much you've changed.
- The reactions you noticed immediately after the traumatic event seem to be getting worse rather than better and you just don't feel in control.

People are usually surprised that reactions to trauma last longer than they expected. Many people will get through this period on their own, with the help and support of friends and family. Many people find that talking to a counselor or joining a group is helpful. Either way, what is most important is to **stay connected with those around you. Don't isolate yourself.**

A Note to Family and Friends: How You Can Help

It's very difficult to know that someone you love has been traumatized. You want to help the pain and fear go away as quickly as possible. There are important ways you *can* help.

- Be willing to listen. Talking about it can make a big difference.
- Don't say things like "Just put it out of your mind." If they could, they would. Instead, invite them to talk about it.
- Be willing to accompany your family member on errands. A terrifying experience can make someone feel unsafe everywhere for a while. It helps to have company.
- Remind them that they are safe and loved.
- Above all, be patient. Remember that your loved one is recovering from an injury. You wouldn't expect a broken leg to heal in a few days!

Where To Find Professional Help

There are psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers that specialize in helping survivors of trauma. These can be located through the professional organizations of those disciplines. Rape crisis centers and victim assistance programs in your state may be additional resources. In the case of a large natural disaster, the Red Cross will be available. At work, your employee assistance program can help.

For additional assistance or information, please contact:

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