

Recovering from Traumatic Events

You have experienced a traumatic incident - an event which will have a very private meaning to you. This article is written to help you learn about the normal, natural reactions to traumatic events and hopefully will help you understand what to expect in the days and weeks that follow.

Trauma Reactions

This sudden and unexpected traumatic event may create an overwhelming feeling of helplessness and may effect you physically, mentally, emotionally behaviorally and spiritually.

Common Physical Reactions

- A feeling of numbness and fatigue
- Weakness or dizziness
- Increased blood pressure
- Increased heart rate
- Chest pain (Please consult a physician)
- Shortness of breath, dry mouth
- Nausea and upset stomach
- Vomiting
- Sweating or chills, clammy skin
- Tremors of hands, lips and eyes
- Visual difficulties
- Muscle aches and headaches
- Grinding of the teeth
- Change in eating habits
- Crying

Emotional Changes May Include:

- Anxiety
- Denial
- Guilt for what we did or did not do
- Agitation
- Anger about what happened
- Fear and worry about the impact of the event
- Irritability
- Sadness and grief (depression)
- A sense of detachment and abandonment
- Feeling lost (isolated)
- Feeling numb
- Feeling powerless, as though you are losing control
- Insomnia

These changes may alter the way we behave and lead to:

- Poor concentration and attention span
- Possible memory loss
- Disturbing images and mental pictures of what took place (dreams as well).
- Difficulty in making even small decisions
- Restlessness and confusion
- Self-blame or blaming others
- Doubting ourselves and others (suspiciousness)
- Withdrawing from others or becoming more aggressive
- Increased alcohol, food and smoking intake (or decrease).
- Excessive humor, silence.

Spiritual Changes May Include:

- Anger at God
- Questioning of basic beliefs
- With drawl 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 etc.

Why Questions

Don't refuse to face the philosophical questions concerning why or why not this event took place. You may find it helpful to talk to a spiritual caregiver.

After a traumatic event the wish to deny that it happened is as strong as the will to talk about it. The following will help speed recovery:

Critical Incident Debriefing (Talk to your supervisor about the possibility of a C.I.S.D. session).

Within the first 24-48 hour periods of appropriate physical exercise, alternated with relaxation will alleviate some of the physical reactions.

- Structure your time - keep busy.
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- Maintaining a good diet, sleep and exercise habits.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Be aware of numbing the pain.

Avoid alcohol, caffeine and nicotine as much as possible. You don't need to complicate this with a substance abuse problem.

• Talk about the incident with people whom you trust, especially those who have experienced the event. They may have similar feelings and reactions Let your family and friends share in your journey. Their support can help you.

- Balance self-isolation with the companionship of others
- Help your co-workers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing.
- Avoid situations that will promote further stress
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feelings with others.
- Keep a journal; write your way through those sleepless hours.
- Don't make any big life changes

Remember

- Your response to the traumatic event is deeply personal and normal.
- You are experiencing natural reactions to an unnatural situation.
- You are not "losing it" - your learned methods of coping have simply not worked in this situation.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal
- don't try to fight them - they'll decrease over time and become less painful.
- You are not, in fact less capable or less competent than others.
- You may trust your judgement.
- Experiencing these reactions does not mean you are weak, a wimp, or unstable. Instead, it means that you are working hard to deal with a very difficult experience.
- Changes in your body, thoughts and emotions will gradually disappear.
- You will survive and find ways to cope and adjust to the changes brought about by the traumatic event.

As you work through the process of regaining perspective, you will become more and more detached from the event. However, if any of the symptoms mentioned continue or are increasing after 4-6 weeks, professional help is recommended.

Children and Trauma How Parents Can Help.

- Take their fears seriously.
- Respect and try to understand their fears. Be sure to validate their expressed fears as normal reaction to trauma.
- Children who think their parents do not understand their fears can feel ashamed, rejected and more afraid.
- Share feelings and anxieties about the event.
- Don't take their expressions of anger personally.
- It may be the child's defense against the awfulness of the traumatic event (s).
- Encourage the child to talk. Listen to what the child says.
- You are the adult. Help the child make sense of the situation by openly discussing the event(s).
- Remember, protective silence hinders the /readjustment process.
- Never underestimate the child's capacity to understand.
- Explain the incident as best as you can. Information empowers and helps normalize the event. Therefore, give accurate information.
- Don't tell them they are lucky it wasn't worse
- Traumatized people are not consoled by these statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and help them.
- Give them private time alone.

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