

Dealing with Stressful Events

It is very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience emotional 'aftershocks' when they have passed through a highly stressful event. These represent extreme levels of the Fight/Flight or Stress response.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the stressful event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later, and in some cases, weeks may pass before the stress reaction appears.

The symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks or occasionally longer, depending on the severity and circumstances of the event. With understanding and support from loved ones, from peers and work colleagues, the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally the event is so distressing that professional assistance may be necessary. This does not imply weakness. It simply indicates that the particular event was just too powerful for the person to manage by himself or herself. Often, proactive and automatic wellbeing check-ins are offered to those involved anyway.

Here are some common signs and symptoms stress reactions that may occur after an incident:

Physical Reactions:

- Fatigue/Exhaustion
- Disturbed sleep
- Nausea/digestive problems
- Headaches/muscle aches
- Nightmares/bad dreams
- Hyperactivity/restlessness
- Startle reactions/sensitivity
- Excessive alertness/jumpiness

Cognitive Reactions:

- Difficulty with concentration
- Difficulty solving problems
- Flashbacks/intrusive thoughts
- Preoccupied with the event
- Difficulty making decisions
- Memory disturbance
- Disorientation/Confusion
- Reduced attention span

Emotional Reactions:

- Fear
- Guilt
- Emotional numbing
- Over-sensitivity
- Anger/blame
- Avoiding certain places or activities
- Anxiety/panic feelings
- Depression
- Feelings of helplessness
- Blocking out the event
- Tearful
- Withdrawal from others

These are normal reactions. Although some of these symptoms can be distressing or painful, they are part of the natural healing process that a person goes through as the mind and body readjust and come to terms with what has occurred.

Reactions to stressful events

The symptoms and difficulties that are experienced following a stressful event are part of the natural process by which a person readjusts following the occurrence of a stressful incident. Coming to terms with what has happened is a bit like psychologically 'digesting' the stressful experience. The event must be digested and absorbed gradually. This takes time and everyone involved may not experience the same symptoms or reactions, and the time taken to readjust will vary.

Initially, it is common to experience shock and disbelief, and a sense that the event seems unreal. It is also common to feel fearful, and in the following days, some people may become worried about any possibility of the incident re-occurring. Subsequently, emotions and feelings often come to the surface: there may be anger feelings experienced over what has happened, a strong sense of 'why me?/why us?'; feelings of helplessness and sadness, and even irrational guilt feelings. You may also experience increased irritability and withdrawal in your close relationships but this should be temporary. Expressing these common feelings allows nature to heal. The feelings usually only last for a short period of time and will lessen over the first few weeks.

Some people will find themselves shutting out memories and thoughts about the event, and at other times, being preoccupied with it. There may also be 'intrusive' memories of the event which force their way into your awareness. This is part of the natural working through process. Physically, you may feel tense and the stress reaction can express itself in a variety of physical symptoms such as headaches and aches, digestive problems and tiredness. Some people also experience reluctance or avoidance feelings about being in the vicinity of where the event occurred, but these should gradually diminish.

Recovering from the Stressful Event

Everyone has a part to play in supporting the recovery from a critical incident, including the individuals who have been impacted directly, those impacted indirectly, the workplace, family, emergency services and the community. There are individual actions you are able to take to reduce the effects of stress and recover from a critical incident.

- (a) Give yourself permission to feel upset and share your feelings with others.
- (b) Talk to people. Express your emotions and needs clearly and honestly to family, friends and supervisors.
- (c) Make contact and stay in touch with your social support network
- (d) Use your own normal coping skills – like exercise or relaxing with a book, or writing
- (e) Remember not to label yourself as weak or crazy if you feel a reaction - you're having normal reactions
- (f) Refrain from overuse of drugs and alcohol. You may be able to numb the pain for a short period, but you may be starting a new set of problems.
- (g) Do things that feel good for you. You deserve it.
- (h) Make as many daily decisions as possible - this will give you a feeling of control over your life;
- (i) Refrain from making any big life changes. Your judgment, at the moment, may be impaired.
- (j) Return to work as soon as possible. Avoidance usually makes matters worse.

Ideally you should seek professional help through the Employee Assistance Program if you feel:

- (a) You cannot handle intensive feelings or signs of stress;
- (b) Your emotions are not returning to normal over a week. You feel chronic tension, confusion, or exhaustion;
- (c) You have to keep active in order not to feel;
- (d) You have no person or group with whom to share your emotions and you feel the need to do so;
- (e) Your relationships seem to be suffering badly or sexual problems develop;
- (f) You continue to smoke, drink or take drugs to excess since the events; or
- (g) Your work performance suffers.