

Reactions to Crisis and Trauma

After a crisis or traumatic event (an event that causes unusually strong reactions and has the potential to overwhelm one’s normal coping mechanism) it is common (and quite normal) for people to experience emotional aftershocks/stress reactions. Sometimes these occur immediately and sometimes it can be hours, days, weeks or months after the event. Reactions can last days, weeks and, in some cases even longer (depending on the impact/severity of the crisis or trauma). While it is impossible know exactly how an individual will react, it is important to understand that trauma affects people in many different ways. These reactions are part of the stress response and are not a sign of weakness or inability to do the job.

Having accurate information about typical reactions coupled with understanding & support from friends, co-workers, family or other loved ones can make big difference to people affected by traumatic events. Sometimes, however, that is not enough and professional assistance may be needed. This does not mean a person is weak, crazy, etc. It simply means that the event or combination of events was just too powerful or overwhelming for the person to manage alone.

Physical	Cognitive	Emotional	Relational	Behavioral	Spiritual
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flight, Fight or Freeze • Shock, numbness • Nausea • Exhaustion • Muscle tremors, shakes or aches • Twitches • Chest pain • Fast pulse • Rapid heart rate • Headaches • Weakness, fatigue • Dizziness • Sweating • Elevated blood pressure • Chills • Trouble sleeping • Excessive sleeping • Diarrhea • Indigestion • Non-specific body complaints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blaming • Confusion • Poor attention • Poor decisions • Hard to concentrate • Memory problems • Hyper-vigilant • Nightmares • Intrusive images • Poor problem solving • Difficulty calculating • Difficulty identifying objects or people • Difficulty remembering details • Time distortion • Auditory distortion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anxiety • Crying • Guilt • Survivor guilt • Numbing • Grief • Disbelief • Denial • Panic • Startle response • Emotional shock • Uncertainty • Depression like symptoms • Apprehension • Irritability • Agitation • Anger • Outbursts • Loss of emotional control • Euphoria • Obsessiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Withdrawal from family, coworkers, colleagues • Withdrawal from organizations or other affiliations • Isolation • Stigma, racism, sexism, media response • Secondary injuries from friends, family, social & professional affiliations contribute to additional stress • Unemployment or under-employment • Discontinued educational pursuits • Lack of community or political involvement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change in speech • Withdrawal • Emotional outbursts • Accident prone • Potential for violence • Suspiciousness • Loss/increase of appetite • Startle reaction • Alcohol/drug consumption • Inability to rest • Pacing • Change in sexual function or sex drive • Crying • Recklessness • Hyper-alert to environment • Ritualistic behavior • Criminal behavior • Loss of motivation • Excessive spending 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questions about faith • Run to or from God • Anger at God • Vulnerability and mortality • Withdraw from faith and religion • Concern about hereafter • Questions about good and evil • Questioning God • Redefining moral values • Promising, bargaining & challenging God during times of duress or trauma • Searching for meaning and hope • Concern about vengeance, justice and forgiveness • Spiritual “awakening”

Always seek medical help or additional assistance if there is even a question that it is needed!

~ **This is a compilation of information inspired by the International Critical Incident Stress Foundation (ICISF) with contributions and input from a whole host of people dedicated to helping others.**



THINGS TO TRY:

- **WITHIN THE FIRST 24 - 48 HOURS** periods of appropriate physical exercise, alternated with relaxation will alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Structure your time; keep busy.
- You're normal and having normal reactions; don't label yourself crazy.
- Talk to people; talk is the most healing medicine.
- Be aware of numbing the pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol, you don't need to complicate this with a substance abuse problem.
- Reach out; people do care.
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- Spend time with others.
- Help your co-workers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feelings with others.
- Keep a journal; write your way through those sleepless hours.
- Do things that feel good to you.
- Realize those around you are under stress.
- Don't make any big life changes.
- Do make as many daily decisions as possible restore a feeling of control over your life, i.e., if someone asks you what you want to eat, answer him even if you're not sure.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Don't try to fight reoccurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks - they are normal and will decrease over time and become less painful.
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you don't feel like it).

FOR FAMILY MEMBERS & FRIENDS

- Listen carefully.
- Spend time with the traumatized person.
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear if (s)he has not asked for help.
- Reassure him that he is safe.
- Help him with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, minding children.
- Give him some private time.
- Don't take his anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't tell him that he is "lucky it wasn't worse;"
 - A traumatized person is not consoled by those statements. Instead, tell him that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and assist.

EXAMPLES OF ASSOCIATIVE/ENVIRONMENTAL (SENSORY TRIGGERS)

Smell of Nomex	Helicopters	Radio Traffic	Burning debris	Tree Branches
Thunderstorms	Aircraft	Air Tankers	Fire Alarms	Fuels/Smell:
Smoke	Chainsaws	Yelling/Loud Voices	Intense Heat	(Jet A, Saw Gas, Drip Mix)
Firelines	Pumps/Small Motors	Retardant/Foam	Any sensory input which was present at the time of the incident	

While many of these signs and signals are normal, seek immediate professional attention if they persist or become overwhelming!