

## Critical Incident Stress

### Symptoms of Traumatic Stress

A traumatic event or a critical incident is any incident that causes you to experience strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with your ability to function either at the scene or later. Even though the event may be over, a person may still be experiencing or may experience later, some strong emotional reactions. It is very common, in fact normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have passed through a terrible event.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic event. In some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear.

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months, and occasionally longer, depending on the severity of the traumatic event. With understanding and the support of loved ones, the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally, the traumatic event is so painful, that professional assistance from a counselor may be necessary. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular event was just too powerful. Think of it as a circuit breaker in an electrical system that disconnects, rather than risking overload to the system. The circuit breaker has done its job by temporarily disconnecting. The system is still intact and all that is needed is for the circuit breaker to be "reset." That can be accomplished through peer counseling, defusing, debriefing and occasionally with the help of a behavioral science specialist. Here are some common signs and signals of a stress reaction:

<u>PHYSICAL</u>	<u>COGNITIVE</u>	<u>EMOTIONAL</u>	<u>BEHAVIORAL</u>
fatigue	blaming someone	anxiety	change in activity
nausea	confusion	guilt	withdrawal
muscle tremors	poor attention	grief	suspiciousness
twitches	poor decisions	denial	alcohol consumption
chest pain	heightened or lowered	severe pain (rare)	inability to rest
difficulty breathing	alertness	emotional shock	antisocial acts
elevated blood	poor concentration	fear	pacing
pressure	memory problems	uncertainty	change in speech
rapid heart rate	hypervigilance	loss of emotional	patterns
thirst	difficulty identifying	control	emotional outbursts
headaches	familiar objects or	depression	loss or increase of
visual difficulties	people	inappropriate	appetite
vomiting	increased or	emotional response	change in usual
grinding teeth	decreased awareness	apprehension	communication
weakness	of surroundings	feeling overwhelmed	erratic movements
dizziness	poor problem solving	intense anger	hyper-alert to
profuse sweating	poor abstract thinking	irritability	environment
chills	loss of time, place or	agitation	startle reflex
shock symptoms	person orientation		intensified
fainting	disturbed thinking		non-specific bodily
	nightmares-intrusive		complaints
	images		increase or decrease
			in sexual functioning

## The Normal Recovery of Normal People: Experiencing Normal Reactions to Abnormal Events

*"Sane people involved in an insane experience"*

### THINGS TO TRY

- Within the first 24-48 hours, periods of strenuous 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 as crazy!
- Talk to people - talk is a most healthy medicine.
- Be aware of numbing the pain with the 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're 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 also under stress.
- Do make as many daily decisions as possible which will give you a feeling of control over your life. (i.e., if someone asks you if you want to eat, answer them even if you're not sure.)
- Get plenty of rest.
- Reoccurring 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 eating.)

### SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILY AND FRIENDS

- Listen carefully.
- Spend time with the traumatized person.
- Offer your assistance and listening ear, even if they don't ask for help.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Help them with everyday tasks, like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, minding the children, etc.
- Give them some private time.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse" - traumatized people are not consoled by those statements. (It will make them feel guilty for feeling what they feel) Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and that you want to understand and assist them.

- Don't feel like you have to have all the answers or know exactly what to do. Just being there shows them that you care. (It is okay to ask them what they would like for you to do.)

Last updated on 08 February 2001.