



COUNSELING CENTER

Coping with Traumatic Events

It is very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have experienced a traumatic event. Any event that causes unusually strong emotional reactions has the potential to interfere with a person’s ability to function normally. This does not imply craziness or weakness; it just indicates that the particular event was just too powerful for the person to manage by him/herself. Support from other people usually causes the stress reaction to pass more quickly.

Sometimes the stress reactions appear immediately after the traumatic event; sometimes they appear a few hours or days later. Here are some common signs and signals of a stress reaction:

Physical Responses

- Change in sleep patterns
Change in appetite
Shallow, rapid breathing
Dizziness
Headaches
Muscle tension
Increased heart rate
Upset stomach

Emotional Responses

- Shock or numbness
Anger toward others involved
Fear
Guilt/Frustration
Sadness
Feeling unsafe or vulnerable
Loneliness

Cognitive Responses

- Confusion
Difficulty concentrating
Difficulties remembering details of event

Behavioral Responses

- Withdrawal from others
Angry outbursts
Crying
Irritability
Decreased energy/ambition
Marital/relationship conflict
Increased use of alcohol or medications
Fear of being alone
Heightened startle response and increased agitation

Adaptive Coping Actions - things that can help to reduce anxiety, lessen other distressing reactions, improve the situation or help you to get through bad times.

- Talk to people; talk is the most healing medicine.
Within the first 24-48 hours, try to alternate periods of appropriate physical exercise with relaxation; this will alleviate some of your physical reactions.
Structure your time; keep busy. Schedule in pleasant activities.
Recognize & accept your feelings as “normal” reactions to extreme circumstances, don’t label yourself as crazy.
Tell yourself that it’s natural to be upset for some period of time.
Be aware of numbing the pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol. Substance use will likely complicate your reaction to an already stressful situation.
Reach out; people do care.
Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
Spend time with others.
Help your friends as much as possible by sharing feelings and check 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.
Use relaxation methods and calming self-talk.
Do not make as many daily decisions as possible that will give you a feeling of control over your life, i.e., if someone asks you what you want to eat, answer them even if you’re not sure.
Get plenty of rest and set aside time to relax.
Don’t try to fight reoccurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks – they are normal and will decrease over time and become less painful.
Eat regular meals that are healthy and well balanced (even if you don’t feel like eating).
If symptoms persist, talking to a counselor can help.

Johns Hopkins University Counseling Center

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3003 N Charles Street, Suite S-200
After hour emergencies contact Security 516-410-7777 and ask to speak with the On-Call Counselor.