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 a 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 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 will normal and will decrease over time and become less painful.**
- **Eat regular meals that are healthy and well balanced (even if you do feel like eating).**
- **If symptoms persist, talking to a counselor can help.**

Johns Hopkins University Counseling Center
410-516-8287
3003 N Charles Street, Suite S-200
After hour emergencies contact Security 516-410-7777 and ask to speak with the On-Call Counselor.