

HIGHLY STRESSFUL OR TRAUMATIC EVENTS

After encountering a highly stressful or traumatic event, you may experience some strong emotional, cognitive, and physical reactions. It is common and normal to experience stress reactions after facing a horrible event. These stress reactions can appear immediately after, a few hours or days after, or sometimes weeks or months after the incident has occurred, and can last a couple of days, months, or sometimes longer, depending on the severity of the traumatic event.

Having the support and understanding of friends and family usually helps us to recover more quickly from the signs and symptoms of stress reactions. Sometimes, the particular event may be too overwhelming to manage by oneself, and therefore, may require professional help. It is extremely important to note that seeking help does not imply weakness, but rather, it reflects the impact of the incident.

The following are common signs and symptoms of a stress reaction:

COGNITIVE	EMOTIONAL	*PHYSICAL*	BEHAVIORAL
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Scattered thinking/dazed ➤ Confusion ➤ Uncertainty ➤ Hyper-vigilance ➤ Being disoriented ➤ Nightmares ➤ Intrusive images: Distressing thoughts, memories, nightmares, or flashbacks. ➤ Looking to Blame someone ➤ Being suspicious of others ➤ Poor problem solving ➤ Poor abstract thinking ➤ Poor attention/decision making ➤ Poor concentration/memory ➤ Difficulty identifying objects or people ➤ Heightened or lowered alertness ➤ Increased or decreased awareness of surrounding ➤ Obsession with the incident & difficulty looking toward the future ➤ Sense of re-living the incident 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fear ➤ Guilt ➤ grief ➤ Panic ➤ Denial ➤ Anxiety ➤ Agitation ➤ Irritability ➤ Depression ➤ Intense anger ➤ Apprehension ➤ Self Doubt/Second guessing oneself ➤ Emotional shock ➤ Emotional outbursts ➤ Feeling overwhelmed ➤ loss of emotional control ➤ Inappropriate emotional response ➤ Numbing or restricted range of emotions ➤ Feeling of inadequacy ➤ Distress at exposure to the event or at anything that represents the event 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Chills ➤ Thirst ➤ Restlessness ➤ Fatigue ➤ Weakness ➤ Dizziness ➤ Upset Bowels ➤ Nausea ➤ Vomiting ➤ Fainting ➤ Chest pain ➤ Headaches ➤ Elevated BP ➤ Rapid heart rate ➤ Difficulty Breathing ➤ Profuse Sweating ➤ Muscle tremors/twitches ➤ Shock symptoms ➤ Grinding teeth ➤ Visual Difficulties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ withdrawal/isolating ➤ inability to relax ➤ intensified pacing ➤ erratic movements ➤ change in speech patterns ➤ loss or increased appetite ➤ hyper-alert to the environment ➤ Poor judgments ➤ Inappropriate decisions ➤ Self destructive or risk taking behaviors ➤ Increased substance use or abuse. ➤ over-reactions or under-reactions ➤ Relationship problems-conflict with friends, family, others. ➤ Decline in work/school performance ➤ Avoiding thoughts, feelings, or places connected with the incident or activities that trigger memories of the event. ➤ Old negative feelings are triggered by the current event.

Note: Any of the physical symptoms may require medical evaluation. Please consult with your physician.

COPING WITH SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF STRESS REACTIONS

The following are suggestions to try to deal with stress reactions:

- Engage in appropriate physical exercise, especially within 48 hours of the incident.
- Engage in regular relaxation activities. This includes breathing exercises and muscle relaxation exercises, in addition to activities that make you feel calm.
- Maintain your usual schedule.
- Structure your time and keep busy.
- Remind yourself that you are having normal reactions to stress.
- Talk to people. Share your thoughts and feelings with others. Don't keep your experiences to yourself.
- Avoid drinking alcohol, taking drugs, and other stimulants, such as caffeine.
- Reach out to people; ask for help or increase your time being around friends and family.
- Help your peers/co-workers as much as possible by sharing feelings and finding out how they are doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel the way you do and share those feelings with others.
- Keep a journal.
- Do things that you enjoy doing.
- Consider that those around you are also under stress.
- Realize what you do have control over and what you don't have control over. Avoid making any big decisions immediately. Exercise making 'small' decisions that are within your control, such as, what you'd like to eat for dinner.
- Get plenty of rest. Ensure that you are getting about 8 hours of sleep per night.
- Don't try to fight reoccurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks. Remember that these are normal responses and will decrease over time and will become less painful.
- Eat regular, well balanced meals, even if you don't feel like eating.

HOW TO HELP FAMILY AND FRIENDS

- Listen carefully. Let the person talk about his/her experience and validate those thoughts and feelings.
- Spend time with the traumatized person.
- Offer your support, including listening, especially if s/he has not asked for help.
- Give reassurance that s/he is safe
- Help with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, and minding the children.
- Give him/her some private time.
- Don't take his/her anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't minimize the other's experience or say things like "you're lucky it wasn't worse"; statements like these are NOT helpful. Instead, tell him/her that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and help in any way.

RESOURCES ON CAMPUS

Counselling & Clinical Services, 2-600 SUB; www.uwell.ualberta.ca or call 780-492-5205.

- Psychological counselling and Psychiatry services.

University Health Centre, 2-200 SUB; www.uwell.ualberta.ca.

- Physician services (walk-in)

Chaplains Office, www.chaplains.ualberta.ca.

- Spiritual counselling; offers access of chaplains from various religious faiths.

Peer Support Centre, 2-707 SUB; www.su.ualberta.ca or call 780-492-4268.

- Supportive listening and referral sources.