Experiencing a Traumatic Event:
Recovery and Coping Strategies

Unexpected events regardless of their nature, a serious accident, an act of violence, a natural disaster or some other incident that has left people directly or indirectly involved feeling unsettled or seriously impacted. The purpose of this handout is to help you understand some possible reactions you may be experiencing as a result of this incident and provide suggestions regarding the best ways to manage your reactions and begin your recovery.

What are some possible reactions?

Even though everyone reacts differently, here are some of the more common ways people who have experienced a traumatic incident may respond:

Physical reactions

Numbness, shock, headaches, loss of appetite, sleep difficulties, persistent heart palpitations, fatigue, nausea, gastrointestinal problems.

Emotional reactions

Fear, anxiety, distress, anger, irritability, sadness, guilt, distrust.

Behavioural reactions

Tearfulness, feeling disconnected, excessive vigilance, withdrawal or isolation, increased tendency to blame or criticize others, increased consumption of alcohol or medication.

Mental reactions

Loss of concentration, forgetfulness, indecisiveness, confusion, distressing dreams and memories, recurring intrusive images about the event.

Are these reactions "normal"?

Absolutely. These are normal reactions that human beings experience when they are in abnormally distressing situations. Research has shown that when you acknowledge these stress reactions and take care of them, they usually diminish and can disappear within a few weeks. Most people recover even after acute traumatic events and they return to normal or close to normal functioning, either on their own or with the assistance of a mental health professional.

Do these reactions always occur right after the event?

Not always. Some individuals don't experience these reactions until later, but this isn't the case for most people. Whether these reactions occur right away or later, they are generally experienced by almost everyone who goes through an abnormally distressing situation.

Need more information or assistance? All calls are completely confidential.
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Is there any way to avoid these types of reactions?

You can never avoid them completely. Even individuals who are well-informed and well-prepared have acute stress reactions in such situations. Police officers, paramedics, first-aid workers, and fire fighters may have strong stress reactions to emergency situations, despite their training and experience. Remember that these are normal reactions.

What can you do?

- Pay more attention to your feelings and reactions than to the event itself.
- Don't judge or blame yourself. Don't criticize yourself for having these reactions. Be patient. Think about how you would support a friend in this situation and then treat yourself the same way.
- Try to reduce other sources of stress in your life for a while.
- Take the time to talk about your physical and emotional reactions with someone close to you like a friend, spouse /partner or family member. You can also turn to coworkers.
- Let your family, colleagues and friends know how they could best support you during your period of recovery. If they are doing something unhelpful, give yourself permission to let them know.
- Get some physical exercise within twenty-four hours following the event, no matter how light it is. Try to stay active.
- Find something that will help distract you from thoughts about the traumatic event. Some people find it helpful to keep busy (leisure activities, hobbies, routine chores, warm baths, physical exercise, etc.), while others find it helpful to relax or go out with friends.
- Take time to rest and maintain good sleep habits.
- If you find you are experiencing distressing images or feeling fearful, remind yourself that you are safer now and try to direct your attention to something else.
- If you are being questioned about the event, it's perfectly appropriate to explain politely that you prefer not to talk about it. You can say, "I understand that you would like to know more about what happened, but I'd rather not talk about this at this time. I hope you'll understand."

What should you do if your stress reactions don't diminish from week to week?

It's better not to keep the problem all to yourself. People close to you don't always know how to help, despite their best intentions. If these reactions have not diminished from week to week, don't hesitate to obtain professional counseling by contacting a local mental health organization or by seeking the assistance of your family doctor. If you take good care of yourself, ensuring that you obtain the support you might need, you will gradually regain your normal sense of self and resume life activities.

What have you gained from your experience?

After some time, once things have calmed down, it can be useful to ask yourself, "What have I learned from this experience?" After a traumatic event, most people learn something about themselves or others, or about what matters most to them. When ready, take some quiet time to think about this. You may make some interesting discoveries.

Need more information or assistance? All calls are completely confidential.

For more information, to book a counselling session, or to access any of your EFAP services our Client Services Representatives are ready to speak with you 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in English or French. All calls are completely confidential.

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