

# **NATURAL REACTIONS TO A STRESSFUL or TRAUMATIC EVENT**

You are experiencing a very stressful event, one that might be considered traumatic. The very nature of such an event can leave you feeling temporarily overwhelmed and not in full control. It is entirely natural to experience the signs of trauma listed below now and moving forward. As with grief, everyone reacts differently to trauma and stress. You may experience several of these signs, or you may experience none. Reactions should subside over time after the stressor is over. If they do not or if you are unable to fulfill your daily responsibilities, please seek help from a counselor through our Employee Assistance Program at 1.800.272.2727

## **COGNITIVE (thought) Reactions**

Disbelief (sense of unreality)  
Mentally replaying events over & over  
Inability to focus or complete tasks  
Confusion  
Impaired memory  
Distressing dreams  
Violent fantasies

## **EMOTIONAL Reactions**

Anger / Irritability  
Crying / Intense feelings  
Numbness  
Anxiety / Fear  
Sadness / Sense of loss  
Loss of motivation  
Sense of vulnerability  
Feelings of inadequacy  
Guilt  
Overwhelmed / Emotionally spent

## **PHYSICAL Reactions**

Headaches  
“Knot” in throat or stomach  
Upset stomach  
Jitteriness  
Diarrhea  
Muscle aches and/or fatigue  
Changes in appetite

## **BEHAVIORAL Reactions**

Withdrawal from others  
Clinging to others  
Being “on guard”  
Restlessness  
Increased urge for alcohol or drugs  
Difficulties with family, acquaintances,  
at work or in school  
Excessive or strange humor  
Uncontrollable behavior  
Unusual behavior

**SPIRITUAL Reactions** In addition, trauma can impact the religious, spiritual, or philosophical assumptions we have as to the nature of the universe. For instance, we may question how God could have let something like this happen. For many, though, religious faith will provide much needed comfort and a context within which to make sense of what has happened.

# STRATEGIES FOR COPING WITH A STRESSFUL or TRAUMATIC EVENT

Trauma and stress can temporarily overwhelm both our ability to feel *all right* and our ability to function normally. Reactions may occur immediately after an event, a few hours or days later, or in some cases, not for weeks, months, or years.

It is important to understand that, as unsettling as they may seem, most of these reactions are natural human responses to an abnormal event. Some are like cold symptoms, signaling that our minds and bodies have mobilized defenses against a perceived threat; while others are actually part of the process by which we heal.

It is quite common to *not feel like yourself* for six to ten weeks or more following a stressful or traumatic event, and not uncommon to occasionally experience sudden emotional *aftershocks* long after that. These may be triggered by locale, media coverage, an anniversary of the event, or by sights, sounds and even smells.

If reactions do not decrease over time, or if you feel a need, seek professional counseling.

## **Remember, it helps to:**

- Express your thoughts and feelings. Seek out people who are supportive. If they get tired of listening, find others to talk to. Talking reduces the intensity of your feelings, calms your mind, clarifies your thinking, fuels recovery and helps you feel more in control. Writing it down also may help.
  - Talk to those who are in this with you. There are numerous coworkers all undergoing the same stress. There is no shame in having a reaction, and sharing with others in the same boat can help you feel better.
  - Take especially good care of yourself (even if you don't feel like it). Find time to relax, even if only for a few minutes. Get rest as much as possible. Eat a balanced diet at regular intervals, exercise and drink lots of water.
  - Avoid using drugs or alcohol to numb yourself. Dealing with the emotional pain is necessary for healing to take place. Alcohol and other drugs inhibit this process.
  - Structure your time. Plan your relaxation just as much as you do your work.
  - Find healthy things to do that either make you feel good about yourself or feel more in control.
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## **Suggestions for family members and friends:**

- Offer your assistance and be available even if you have not been specifically asked.

- Be sensitive to and respectful of shifting needs for companionship, private time or space.
- Help with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, mowing the lawn, child care, etc.
- Do not take misplaced anger or other uncharacteristic emotions or behaviors personally.
- Providing a listening ear may be the most helpful thing you can do.