

COMMON REACTIONS TO CRITICAL INCIDENTS (Traumatic Events or Deaths)

Even otherwise healthy individuals may feel stress as a result of disaster, traumatic events or deaths, whether by natural or human causes. Stress reactions are often natural responses in normal people to abnormal events. Typically, these feelings don't last long, and for some, they may not begin to appear for weeks or even months after the event.

Reactions vary, but may include one or more of the following:

Physical

- Sweating
- Heart Racing
- Fatigue, Weakness
- Headaches, Body Aches
- Shortness of Breath
- Nausea or Vomiting
- Shifts in Appetite
- Sleep Problems

Thinking

- Poor Concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Mental Confusion
- Difficulty

Emotional

- Anxiety/Fear
- Sadness/Depression
- Guilt
- Irritability/Anger
- Crying
- Insecurity
- Flashbacks
- Nightmares

Behavioral

- Hyperactivity/Restlessness
- Withdrawal/or Fear of Being Alone
- Increased use of Drugs or Alcohol
- "Robot-Like" Behavior

All of the above feelings and reactions are normal even though they may seem unusual. Some reactions differ from others. We are all individuals. We all respond in our own way, differently and uniquely.

The memory of the stressful event/incident will probably always be a part of your life. It cannot be erased, nor should it be. Memory is essential for healing.

Everyone moves at his/her own pace through the states of crisis and healing. Passing through a crisis will help some people cope with future challenges more effectively.

If the reactions to stress and feelings of anxiety, depression, or physical ailments continue, professional consultation is advisable.

SUGGESTIONS—ENHANCE RECOVERY

1. Respect the need for patience and expect change with the passage of time.
2. Be willing to talk about what happened and express your thoughts. Talking about the incident and your reactions is critical to healing.
3. Share your feelings rather than holding them in. This will help you feel better about the experience and heal more rapidly.
4. Be gentle with yourself—there are always things we could have done differently. "If only" is a frequent, temporary way the mind reflects back.
5. Draw on supports that nurture you during your time off. These supports may include friends, reading, recreation, religion, prayer, meditation, and exercise.
6. Take care of yourself physically: good diet, adequate sleep, rest and exercise, even a long daily walk, will help you considerably.
7. If needed, give yourself permission to spend some time alone after work, but don't totally withdraw from social interaction.
8. Keeping a journal can be helpful as a release. You may find writing a healing and a creative and important reflection of your experience.
9. Stopping from time-to-time to take four or five deep, cleansing breaths is rejuvenating and relaxing.
10. Attend debriefing groups and stress education programs that maybe offered.

NEGATIVE COPING BEHAVIORS:

1. Abusing alcohol or drugs; self-medicating.
2. Overeating or eating sugar and junk food snacks.
3. Neglecting health and grooming.
4. Becoming distracted, reckless, and accident-prone.
5. Isolating oneself from social interaction.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Little Rock Community Mental Health Center and Project COPE staff thanks the FEMNOES Federal/State/Local Coordinating Office for these materials.

Project COPE is a disaster recovery program created by the Little Rock Community Mental Health Center funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).