You have experienced a traumatic event or a critical incident (any incident that causes emergency service personnel to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential to interfere with their ability to function either at the scene or later).

Even though the event may be over, you may now be experiencing or may experience later, some strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have passed through a horrible event.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. And, in some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear.

The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event.

With understanding and the support of loved ones the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally, the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be necessary. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular event was just too powerful for the person to manage by themselves.

HERE ARE SOME COMMON SIGNS AND SIGNALS OF A STRESS REACTION:

Physical*

Chills, thirst, fatigue, nausea, fainting, twitches, vomiting, dizziness, weakness, chest pain, headaches, elevated blood pressure, rapid heart rate, muscle tremors, shock symptoms, grinding of teeth, visual difficulties, profuse sweating, difficulty breathing, etc.

* Any of these symptoms may indicate the need for medical evaluation. When in doubt, contact a physician.

Cognitive

Confusion, nightmares, uncertainty, hypervigilance, suspicious thoughts, intrusive images, blaming someone, poor problem solving, poor abstract thinking, poor attention / decisions, poor concentration / memory, disorientation of time, place or person, difficulty identifying objects or people, heightened or lowered alertness, increased or decreased awareness of surroundings, etc.

Emotional

Fear, guilt, grief, panic, denial, anxiety, agitation, irritability, depression, intense anger, apprehension, emotional shock, emotional outbursts, feeling overwhelmed, loss of emotional control, inappropriate emotional response, etc.

Behavioral

Withdrawal, antisocial acts, inability to rest, intensified pacing, erratic movements, change in social activity, change in speech patterns, loss or increase of appetite, hyperalert to environment, increased alcohol consumption, change in usual communications, etc.

Spiritual

Anger at God, questioning of basic beliefs, withdrawal from place of worship, faith practices and rituals seem empty, loss of meaning and purpose, uncharacteristic religious involvement, sense of isolation from God, anger at clergy, etc.

WAYS FOR YOU TO RESPOND TO THE STRESS REACTION

- WITHIN THE FIRST 24 - 48 HOURS, periods of appropriate physical exercise, alternated with relaxation will alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Structure your time - keep busy.
- You're normal and having normal reactions don't label yourself crazy.
- Talk to people - talk is the most healing medicine.
- Beware of numbing the pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol, you don't need to complicate this with a substance abuse problem.
- Reach out - people do care.
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- Spend time with others.
- Help your co-workers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking 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 that those around you are under stress.
- Don't make any big life changes.
- Do make as many daily decisions as possible which 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 are not sure.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Reoccurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal - don't try to fight them - they'll decrease over time and become less painful.
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you don't feel like it).

WAYS FOR FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS TO RESPOND TO YOUR STRESS REACTION

- Listen carefully.
- Spend time with the traumatized person.
- Offer your assistance and listening ear if they have not asked for help.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, minding children.
- Give them some private time.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse" - traumatized people are not consoled by those statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and assist them.

CISM Information Pamphlet

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