



TRAUMATIC EVENTS INFORMATION SHEET

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 work 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 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 even 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 events are so painful that professional assistance from a counsellor may be necessary. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular traumatic event was too powerful for the person to manage by themselves.

Here are some very common signs and symptoms of a stress reaction.

Physical

- Nausea
- Upset stomach
- Tremors (lips, hands)
- Feeling uncoordinated
- Profuse sweating
- Chills
- Diarrhoea
- Dizziness
- Chest Pain (should be checked at hospital)
- Rapid heart beat
- Rapid breathing
- Increased blood pressure
- Headaches
- Muscle aches
- Sleep disturbance etc.

Thinking

- Slowed thinking
- Difficulty making decisions
- Difficulty in problem solving
- Confusion
- Disorientation (especially to place & time)
- Difficulty calculating
- Difficulty concentrating
- Memory problems
- Difficulty naming common objects
- Seeing the event over & over
- Distressing dreams
- Poor attention span etc.

Emotional

- Anxiety
- Fear
- Guilt
- Grief
- Depression
- Sadness
- Feeling lost
- Feeling abandoned
- Feeling isolated
- Worry about others
- Wanting to limit contact with others
- Anger
- Irritability
- Feeling numb
- Startled
- Shocked
- etc



TRAUMATIC EVENTS INFORMATION SHEET

Helpful Hints

Trying some of the following hints may help to alleviate the emotional pain associated with a traumatic event.

For Yourself

- Try to rest a bit more
- Contact friends
- Have someone stay with you at least a few hours or periods for a day or so
- Reoccurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks are normal – don't try to fight them – they'll decrease over time and become less painful
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even when you don't feel like it)
- Try to keep a reasonable level of activity
- Fight against boredom
- Physical activity is often helpful
- Re-establish a normal schedule as soon as possible
- Express your feelings as they arise
- Talk to people who love you
- Find a good counsellor if the feelings become prolonged or too intense

For Family Members & Friends

- Listen carefully
- Spend time with the traumatised person
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear even 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 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.

Your loved one has been involved in an emotion-charged event, often known as a critical incident. He/she may be experiencing normal stress responses to such an event (critical incident stress). Critical incident stress affects up to 87% of all emergency service personnel exposed to a critical incident. No one is immune to critical incident stress, regardless of past experiences or years of service.



TRAUMATIC EVENTS INFORMATION SHEET

Important Things to Remember about Critical Incident Stress

- The signs of critical incident stress are physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioural. Your loved one has received a handout outlining these signs; please ask him/her to share it with you.
- Critical incident stress responses can occur right at the scene, within hours, within days, or even within weeks.
- Your loved one may experience a variety of signs/symptoms of a stress response or he/she may not feel any of the signs at this time.
- Suffering from the effects of critical incident stress is completely normal. Your loved one is not the only one suffering; other people and co-workers who shared the event are probably sharing the reactions.
- The symptoms will normally subside and disappear in time if you or your loved one does not dwell upon them.
- All phases of our lives overlap and influence each other: personal, professional, family, etc. The impact of critical incident stress can be intensified, influenced or mitigated by our own personal, family, and current developmental issues.
- Encourage, but do **NOT** pressure your loved one to talk about the incident and his/her reaction to it. Talk is the best medicine. Your primary 'job' is to listen and reassure. Remember that if an event is upsetting to you and your loved one, your children may be affected also. They may need to talk too.
- You may not understand what your loved one is going through at this time, but offer your love and support. Don't be afraid to ask what you can do that he/she would consider helpful.
- Accept the fact that life will go on: his/hers, yours and your children, etc. Maintain or return to a normal routine as soon as possible.
- If the signs of stress your loved one is experiencing do not begin to subside within a few weeks, or if they intensify, consider seeking further assistance.