



**Faculty and Staff Assistance**  
“A place to find support. . .”

## **CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS**

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

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks or stress reactions appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few days later or, 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 or longer, depending upon 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 traumatic event was just too powerful for the person to manage by himself or herself.

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

### **PHYSICAL**

Nausea  
Upset stomach  
Tremors  
Feeling uncoordinated  
Profuse sweating  
Chills  
Diarrhea  
Chest pain (get it checked  
at hospital)  
Rapid heart beat  
Rapid breathing  
Increased blood pressure  
Headaches  
Muscle aches  
Sleep disturbances

### **MENTAL**

Slowed thinking  
Difficulty making decisions  
Difficulty with problem solving  
Confusion  
Disorientation  
Difficulty with concentration  
Memory problems  
Distressing dreams  
Poor attention span  
Difficulty naming common objects  
Seeing the event over and over  
Feeling numb

### **EMOTIONAL**

Anxiety  
Fear  
Guilt  
Grief  
Depression  
Sadness  
Feeling isolated  
Abandoned or lost  
Anger  
Irritability  
Wanting to hide  
or limit contact with  
others  
Shock  
Worry about others

## **HELPFUL HINTS**

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

### **FOR YOURSELF**

- Rest a bit more
- Contact friends
- Have someone stay with you for a few hours for a day or so
- Don't try to fight recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks; they'll decrease over time and become less painful.
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible
- Eat regular, well-balanced meals, even when you don't feel like it
- Maintain a reasonable level of activity
- Fight against boredom
- Physical activity is often helpful
- Express your feelings when they arise
- Talk to people who love you
- Find a good counselor if the feelings become prolonged or too intense

### **FOR FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS**

- Listen carefully
- Spend time with the traumatized person
- Reassure them that they are safe
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear if they have not asked for help
- Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, minding the 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 that you want to understand and assist them.

If the symptoms described above are severe or if they last longer than six weeks, the traumatized person may need professional counseling. Contact a private practice psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker or your local community mental health center for assistance.

Jeffrey Mitchell, Ph.D. of the University of Maryland's Emergency Health Services Program, has prepared the information on this sheet.

If you need further assistance, please contact:

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