

- Common Responses to Traumatic Events -

Although trauma affects people differently, there are some common reactions that you may experience. These signs and symptoms may begin immediately, or you may feel fine for a couple of days or even weeks, then suddenly be hit with a reaction. The important thing to remember is that these reactions are quite normal; although you may feel some distress, you're probably experiencing a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

Some common responses to traumatic events are listed below:

Physical Reactions:

- Insomnia/Nightmares
- Fatigue
- Hyperactivity or "Nervous Energy"
- Appetite Changes
- Pain in the Neck or Back *
- Headaches
- Heart Palpitations/Pains in the Chest *
- Dizzy Spells *

Emotional Reactions:

- Flashbacks or "Reliving" the Event
- Excessive Jumpiness or Tendency to be Startled
- Irritability
- Anger
- Feelings of Anxiety or Helplessness

Effects on Productivity:

- Inability to concentrate
- Increased Incidence of Errors
- Lapses of Memory
- Increase in Absenteeism
- Tendency to Overwork

Usually, the signs and symptoms of trauma will lessen with time. If you are concerned about your reaction, note the specific symptoms that worry you.

For each symptom, note the:

Duration: Normally, trauma reactions will grow less intense and disappear within a few weeks.

Intensity: If the reaction interferes with your ability to carry on your life normally, you may wish to seek help.

If you are concerned that your trauma response is too intense, or is lasting too long, please seek counseling. Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP), community mental health center, physician, or priest/minister/rabbi may be able to refer you to a qualified counselor.

Whether you choose to seek counseling or not, the following tips can help you keep your life in order while you experience the trauma response:

- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible, but don't overdo it. Cut out unnecessary "busyness" and don't take on new projects.
- Acknowledge that you'll be operating below your normal level for some time.
- Structure your time even more carefully than usual. It's normal to forget things when you're under stress. Keep lists and double check any important work.
- Maintain control where you can. Make small decisions, even if you feel that it's unimportant or you don't care. It's important to maintain control in some areas of your life.
- Spend time with others, even though it may be difficult at first. It's easy to withdraw when you're hurt, but now you need the company of others.
- Give yourself time. You may feel better for a while, then have a "relapse". This is normal. Allow plenty of time to adjust to the new realities.

*If you experience these symptoms, please see a physician.

- The Healing Process -

Although the healing process is so individual and personal, there are some common steps that most people go through. Although this process is natural and normal, it is also painful and difficult. Moving through the healing process means acknowledging a painful reality and integrating it into your life in a meaningful way. That may require a lot of time and patience. The following points summarize what we know about the healing process:

1. *Make a connection between the event and your response.* The response to trauma may be immediate or delayed, mild or intense. It may include numbness or a strong connection with another event that caused feelings of loss or helplessness. It's crucial to have the support of others and at the right time to make the connection between your pain and the event itself. Try to keep from sealing off your reactions and feelings.
2. *Find a safe environment for emotional sharing.* A very natural human response to trauma is to deny or "wall off" the painful reaction to the event. While you may need privacy to deal with events and feeling in your own way and your own time, you also need to talk about these feelings, either with friends, family, colleagues, or with a counselor or trauma specialist.
3. *Make an effort to think the event through, either individually or in a group.* It's important to be able to acknowledge your feelings of sadness, anger, confusion, or guilt. If others went through the trauma too, talking about it together could help all of you make sense out of what may have been a senseless event.
4. *Ask the questions that don't have easy answers.* For example: "Why does it always happen to the good person?" "How could someone do this?"

5. *Allow memories of painful events in the past to surface, even if you feel that you have already dealt with them.* Trauma brings back memories of trauma. Although it may seem unfair, an incident can make you remember and sometimes rework experiences that don't usually intrude your everyday life. This is normal. By consciously remembering and re-experiencing these painful events, the memories will eventually recede into the background. The mistake is to push them down again too fast, too soon.
6. *Examine for yourself, as an individual as well as a member of the group, what this event means for you.* An example: "As a result of this, we recognize how important we are to one another and how little time we spend communication. We need to examine our values more closely". This helps encourage acceptance of a new, more difficult, reality and the beginning of being able to move on with your life.

The healing process doesn't always proceed in a straight line. You may seem to be recovering, but then something – the anniversary of the incident or hearing about a similar incident – can cause a setback. But if you keep in mind these points about the healing process, you'll be better equipped to eventually work through the pain.