

PSYCHOLOGICAL FIRST AID INFORMATION SHEET

You have experienced a sequence of events that may cause you to experience unusually strong emotional reactions that may interfere with your ability to function. 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 difficult event.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately. 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 never appear or may last a few days, a few weeks or even a few months and occasionally longer, depending on the severity of the difficult event. With understanding and the support of loved ones, the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally, the difficult 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 event was too powerful for the person to manage by themselves.

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

PHYSICAL

nausea
upset stomach
tremors (lips, hands)
feeling uncoordinated
profuse sweating
chills
diarrhea
dizziness
chest pain (should be checked at hospital)
rapid heart beat
increased blood pressure
headaches
muscle aches
sleep disturbance
etc.

THINKING

slowed thinking
difficulty making decisions
difficulty in problem-solving
confusion
disorientation (especially to place and time)
difficulty calculating
difficulty concentrating
memory problems
difficulty naming common objects
seeing the event over and 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

HELPFUL HINTS

You can take care of yourself by:

- 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
- Be aware 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 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're 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).

Family & Friends can help by:

- Listening carefully
- Spending time with the traumatized person
- Offering your assistance and a listening ear even if they have not asked for help
- Reassuring them that they are safe
- Helping with every day tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, minding children
- Giving you some private time
- Not telling you that you 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

If the symptoms described above are severe or if they last longer than six weeks, it may be helpful to access the professional counselling through fseap.

What We Need During Grief

TIME

Time alone, and time with others whom you trust and who will listen when you need to talk. Time to feel and understand the feelings that go along with loss.

REST - RELAXATION - EXERCISE - NOURISHMENT - DIVERSION

You may need extra amounts of things you needed before; hot baths, afternoon naps, a trip, a "cause" to work or to help others - any of these may give you a lift. Grief is an exhausting process emotionally. You need to replenish yourself. Follow what feels healing to you and what connects you to the people and things you love.

SECURITY

Try to reduce or find help for financial or other stresses in your life. Allow yourself to be close to those you trust. Getting back into a routine helps. You may need to allow yourself to do things at your own pace.

HOPE

You may find hope and comfort from those who have experienced a similar loss. Knowing some things that helped them, and realizing that they have recovered may give you hope that sometime in the future your grief will be less raw and painful.

CARING

Try to allow yourself to accept the expressions of caring from others even though they may be uneasy and awkward. Helping a friend or relative also suffering the same loss may bring a feeling of closeness with that person.

GOALS

For a while, it will seem that much of life is without meaning. At times like these, small goals are helpful. Something to look forward to, like playing tennis with a friend next week, a movie tomorrow night, a trip next month helps you get through the time in the immediate future. Living one day at a time is a rule of thumb. At first, don't be surprised if your enjoyment of these things isn't the same. This is normal. As time passes, you may need to work on some long range goals to give some structure and direction to your life.

SMALL PLEASURES

Do not underestimate the healing effects of small pleasures as you are ready. Sunsets, a walk in the woods, a favorite food - all are small steps toward regaining your pleasure in life itself.

PERMISSION TO BACKSLIDE

Sometimes after a period of feeling good, we find ourselves back in the feelings of extreme sadness, despair, or anger. This is often the nature of grief, up and down, and it may happen over and over for a time. It happens because, as humans, we cannot take in all of the pain and the meaning of death at once. So we let it in a little at a time.

FEELING LOSS

Take time to lament. It may be necessary to spend some time feeling sorry for yourself. It's all right to cry, to question, to experience the feeling of being a victim or protest the unfairness of what's happened. Allow yourself to feel whatever is there.

HELP

Remember you may be a rookie at the grief experience you're going through. This may be the first death of someone close. You're new at this, and you're not sure what to do. As with any new skill, sometimes it's nice to have some help - a friend or counselor with whom to talk.

DRUGS - AVOID IF POSSIBLE

Even medication used to help people get through periods of shock under a physician's guidance, may prolong and delay the necessary process of grieving. We cannot prevent or cure grief. The healthy way **OUT** is **THROUGH**.

BE GENTLE WITH YOURSELF

Healing takes time. Allow yourself that time. Try to keep major decisions or new responsibilities to a minimum. You will want to conserve your energy for your healing process. Treat yourself with the same kindness you would a close friend who had experienced a similar loss.

This information is taken from the work of Maryann Harter Danson, R.N., M.S., Hilltop Hospice, Grand Junction, Colorado.