

Common Stress Reactions

If you have experienced a significant event or serious incident, you might find yourself having unusually troubling emotional reactions, potentially so disruptive that they may interfere with your ability to function normally. These events could be anything from natural disasters, serious accidents, suicides, homicides, and terrorism. Even though the event may be over, it is very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience strong emotional and/or physical reactions directly after the event, or sometimes over time. Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or days later, and in some cases, weeks or months before the stress reactions appear.

These stress reaction symptoms vary in duration, sometimes lasting a few days, a few weeks, months, or longer, depending on the severity of the traumatic event. Support and understanding may help these ease stress reactions. However, occasionally, the traumatic event is so painful it may require professional assistance. This does not imply mental instability or weakness; it simply indicates that the event was just too powerful for the person to manage by themselves.

Symptoms of a Stress Reaction

Please note: This is NOT a complete list, merely an example of common stress reactions.

Tension: Physical and emotional tension, muscle tremors or twitches, unable to sit still for any length of time.

Fatigue: Decreased energy, ability to sleep, or a desire to sleep continuously.

Sleep Disturbances: Insomnia, bad dreams, nightmares, or waking up too early.

Diet: Change in eating or drinking habits. Increased or decreased intake.

Nausea: Queasiness, nausea, vomiting other gastrointestinal problems.

Recurring Memories: Thinking about the incident or some associated recurring memory.

Negative Feelings: Unpleasant feelings that may come without warning: profound sadness, helplessness, fear, anxiety, anger, rage, discouragement, frustration, sense of vulnerability, and depression.

Self-Blame: A vague feeling of self-blame, fixed on some aspect of the event.

Interpersonal Problems: Increased irritability, insensitivity, blaming others for your problems, wanting distance instead of closeness.

Things to Try:

- Periods of appropriate physical exercise, alternated with relaxation will alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Structure your time and try keeping busy.
- You're normal and having normal reactions - don't label yourself crazy.
- Talk to people! Expression is one of the most healing forms of medicine.
- Be aware of numbing the pain with the overuse of drugs or alcohol.
- Reach out - People do care and know you are never alone.
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- Spend time with others
- Help your co-workers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking how they are doing.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feelings with others or keep a journal and log your thoughts and feelings.
- Do things that feel good to you.
- Realize those around you are also under stress.
- Stray away from making any big life changes. Wait until you have a clear head and can control your emotions.
- Make daily decisions that promote a feeling of control in your life. For example, if someone asks you what you want to eat, answer them even if you're not sure.
- Get plenty of rest and eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you don't feel like it).
- Don't try to fight reoccurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks - they are normal and will decrease over time and become less painful.

For Family Members and Friends:

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