

CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS INFORMATION SHEET

You have experienced a traumatic event or a critical incident (any incident that causes people to experience unusually strong emotional reactions which have the potential to affect their ability to function at their workplace, within their families, and/or in other areas of their lives). This event or events may be time-limited or may be ongoing or chronic.

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 or be subject to ongoing stressors.

Sometimes the emotional after-shocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the traumatic event. 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 last a few days, a few weeks or 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 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 event was just too powerful for the person to manage by themselves. Here are some very common signs and signals of a stress reaction:

PHYSICAL: Fatigue, thirst, headaches, visual difficulties, vomiting, grinding of teeth, weakness, dizziness, profuse sweating, chills, rapid heart rate, nausea, muscle tremors, twitches, chest pain, * difficulty breathing, elevated blood pressures, * shock symptoms, fainting, etc. (*Indicates the need for medical evaluation).

COGNITIVE:(AFFECTING THOUGHTS): blaming someone, confusion, poor attention, poor decisions, heightened or lowered alertness, poor concentration, memory problems, hyper-vigilance, difficulty identifying familiar objects/people, increased or decreased awareness of surroundings, poor problem solving, poor abstract thinking, loss of time, place, or person orientation, disturbed thinking, nightmares, intrusive images, etc.

EMOTIONAL: anxiety, guilt, grief, denial, severe panic (rare), emotional shock, fear, uncertainty, loss of emotional control, depression, inappropriate emotional response, apprehension, feeling overwhelmed, intense anger, irritability, agitation, etc.

BEHAVIORAL: change in activity, change in speech patterns, withdrawal, emotional outbursts, suspiciousness, change in usual communications, loss or increase of appetite, alcohol consumption, inability to rest, antisocial acts, nonspecific bodily complaints, hyper-alertness to environment, intensification of startle reflex, pacing, erratic movements, change in sexual functioning, etc.

THINGS TO TRY:

1. Within the first 24-48 hours, periods of strenuous physical exercise.
2. Structure your time—keep busy.
3. You're normal and having normal reactions. Don't label yourself crazy.
4. Talk to people. Talk is the most healing medicine.
5. Be aware of numbing the pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol. You don't need to complicate this with a substance abuse problem.
6. Reach out—people do care.
7. Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
8. Spend time with others.
9. Help your co-workers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing.
10. Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feeling with others.
11. Keep a journal, write your way through those sleepless hours.
12. Do things that feel good to you.
13. Realize that those around you are under stress.
14. Don't make any big life changes.
15. 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 aren't sure.
16. Get plenty of rest.
17. Recurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks are normal—don't try to fight them—they'll decrease over time and become less painful.
18. Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you don't feel like it).

FOR FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS

1. Listen carefully and spend time with the person who is hurting.
2. Offer your assistance and a listening ear even if they have not asked for help.
3. Reassure them that they are safe.
4. Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, minding children.
5. Give them some private time.
6. Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
7. Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse"—traumatized people aren't consoled by that. Tell them you're sorry this event has occurred and that you want to understand and help.