



THE JOHNS HOPKINS INSTITUTIONS

East Baltimore Campus – Johns Hopkins at Eastern – Washington D.C.

443-997-7000 – <http://hopkinsworklife.org/fasap/index.cfm>

CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS

Have you 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.

Common signs and symptoms of a stress reaction:

PHYSICAL

Nausea
Upset stomach
Tremors
Feeling uncoordinated
Profuse sweating
Chills
Diarrhea
Chest pain (should be checked at hospital)
Rapid heartbeat
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

EMOTIONAL

Anxiety
Fear
Guilt
Grief
Depression
Sadness
Feeling isolated
abandoned or lost
Anger
Irritability
Feeling numb
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 four weeks, the traumatized person may need professional counseling. FASAP provides assessment of your current concerns, brief, supportive counseling, referral to appropriate and accessible community services and resources. To schedule an appointment with a FASAP clinician, call 443-997-7000.

The Faculty and Staff Assistance Program can be a helpful resource to you, your family and colleagues. Please contact us for assistance at 443-997-7000.

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