

# CRITICAL INCIDENT STRESS INFORMATION SHEETS

You have experienced a traumatic event or a critical incident (any event that causes unusually strong emotional reactions that have the potential to interfere with the ability to function normally). 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.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (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, a few months, or longer, depending on the severity of the traumatic event. The understanding and the support of loved ones usually cause the stress reactions to pass more quickly. Occasionally, the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance 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 himself or herself.

Here are some common signs and signals of a stress reaction:

<i>Physical*</i>	<i>Cognitive</i>	<i>Emotional</i>	<i>Behavioral</i>	<i>Spiritual</i>
chills	confusion	fear	withdrawal	anger at God
thirst	nightmares	guilt	antisocial acts	questioning of basic beliefs
fatigue	uncertainty	grief	inability to rest	withdrawal from place of worship
nausea	hypervigilance	panic	intensified pacing	crisis of faith
fainting	suspiciousness	denial	erratic movements	faith practices and rituals seem empty
twitches	intrusive images	anxiety	change in social activity	loss of meaning and purpose
vomiting	blaming someone	agitation	change in speech patterns	uncharacteristic religious involvement
dizziness	poor problem solving	irritability	loss or increase of appetite	sense of isolation from God
weakness	poor abstract thinking	depression	hyperalert to environment	anger at clergy
chest pain	poor attention /decisions	intense anger	increased alcohol consumption	religious obsessions
headaches	poor concentration /memory	apprehension	change in usual communications	religious compulsions
elevated BP	disorientation of time, place or person	emotional shock	etc...	religious hallucinations or delusions
rapid heart rate	difficulty identifying objects or people	emotional outbursts		etc...
muscle tremors	heightened or lowered alertness	feeling overwhelmed		
shock symptoms	increased or decreased awareness of surroundings	loss of emotional control		
grinding of teeth	etc...	inappropriate emotional response		
visual difficulties		etc...		
profuse sweating				
difficulty breathing				
etc...				

**\* Any of these symptoms may indicate the need for medical evaluation.  
When in doubt, contact a physician.**

## **THINGS YOU CAN DO TO HELP YOURSELF**

### **IT'S OKAY . . .**

- Remember you're having normal human reactions. You're not going crazy or having a nervous breakdown.
- Give yourself permission to feel bad. Like the flu, traumatic stress has to run its course.
- Unwanted thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal too. They should decrease over time.

### **STAY IN TOUCH WITH OTHERS**

- Don't isolate yourself.
- Talk it out with people. Talk is a very healing medicine.
- Allow supportive people to assist you.
- Reach out to people who care – family, friends, chaplains, clergy, coworkers, counselors.
- Don't wait to ask for help if you want or need it.
- Stay active.
- Maintain a normal, active and productive schedule; modify as necessary.
- Physical exercise (within your normal limits) is one of the best ways to reduce stress.
- Do healthy things you enjoy.

### **HELP OTHERS**

- Realize that those around you may be under stress.
- Help your co-workers. How are they doing?
- Assist family members who may also be experiencing stress.

### **TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF**

- Avoid stressful situations for a while, as possible.
- Have some relaxing times.
- Don't abuse drugs or alcohol. This can hinder and delay recovery.
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you don't feel like it).
- Get plenty of rest, remembering that sleep disturbance is common.
- Delay making major life decisions until your stress level lowers and symptoms decrease significantly.

## **WHAT YOU CAN DO FOR OTHERS**

### **LISTEN**

- Acknowledge feelings as normal.
- Be sensitive to individual circumstances and different points of view.
- Don't respond with "you're lucky it wasn't worse." Instead, say that you are sorry such an event occurred and you want to understand and help.
- Don't take emotional responses, such as anger, personally.
- Respect an individual's need for privacy. If someone doesn't want to talk about the incident or their feelings, don't insist.

### **REACHING OUT AT WORK**

- Organize support groups at work to help one another.
- Offer a "listening ear" to someone who hasn't asked for help but may need it.
- Give encouragement, support and understanding with on-the-job issues.
- Identify resources for additional help (EAP, mental health, chaplains, human resource department).

### **HELPING FAMILY AND FRIENDS**

- Offer to spend time with the traumatized person. Reassure them that they are safe now.
- Offer help with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family.
- Respect their need for privacy and time alone.
- Suggest available help (EAP, chaplains, community resources, church groups, etc.).
- Keep communication open – be available and accessible.