



## Taking Care of Yourself

It is important to take care for yourself emotionally, physically and spiritually during times of change and loss. The following tips may be helpful to you:

- **Relaxation techniques can be helpful.** Stress is completely normal at a time like this. Acknowledge that you may have a lot of unpleasant feelings. Learn some stress management strategies and use them frequently. Give yourself time to recover from the crisis.
- **Sleep is always important - but especially now.** Restlessness, nightmares and obsessing about the event can disrupt your sleep. Make sure you allow enough time for a full night's sleep. If you have difficulty sleeping for more than a week, consult your doctor.
- **Exercise can help clear the cobwebs.** A brisk walk is good for the body and has a calming effect on the mind as well. Mild exercises can help combat stress but don't over do it. Even if you exercise regularly, over exercising can lead to injury. You don't need that right now!
- **Connect with friends and support systems.** Don't wait for someone to call. Reach out. Support systems can ease the pain.
- **Develop appreciations.** Regardless of the traumatic event, there are still things to be thankful for. Take some time to identify areas of your life that are still good: friends, family, warm memories, health.
- **Develop patience.** Recovering from a traumatic event takes time.
- **Find out about what resources are available to help you with the recovery process.** There are a multitude of books that will reassure you that your responses to the event are normal. Joining a support group and sharing with others will help. Your EAP is also available to help.
- **Let go of the mask of composure.** Allow your feelings to flow whether this is anger, sadness or guilt.
- **Eat healthy foods.** Do your best to maintain an adequate diet.
- **Give yourself simple pleasures that remind you there is joy in life.** You can listen to music; take walks in nature, etc.
- **Be aware of when you need to ask for help.** Some unhealthy signs of healing are:
  - Poor self care - excessive weight gain or weight loss
  - Prolonged isolation from family and friends
  - Depression that does not ease up as time passes
  - Frequent suicidal thoughts
  - Alcohol or drug abuse

## **Post-Traumatic Stress-Critical Incident Stress**

### **HOW A TRAGIC OR TRAUMATIC EVENT CAN AFFECT YOU.**

Experiencing a critical incident or traumatic event can be an emotional shock, even when it's part of the job that you have been trained for. A critical incident is a tragic or traumatic event that causes a person to experience unusually strong emotional reactions, which have the potential to overwhelm your normal coping abilities. We all react in our own way, but there are also some general reactions that we may share. If you understand the normal, natural reactions, which are the result of involvement in highly unusual situations, you will be better prepared to deal with them.

#### **Some types of Critical Incidents:**

- Serious injury or death of a coworker at work
- Serious injury or death of a family member under tragic circumstances
- Actual or perceived threat to your own physical safety/life
- Workplace violence or disaster
- Natural disasters

Common reactions to critical incidents at the time may include: physiological responses which are *beyond your control* such as nausea, profuse sweating, need for a washroom. Crying, muscle tremors, chest pains, hyperventilation, increased blood pressure and heart rate are also common physical reactions. Perception is often distorted so that hearing can seem muffled, time can be slowed up or seems to pass very quickly. Tunnel vision is another common distortion.

The first few hours after a traumatic incident may be characterized by shock, emotional numbness, disbelief, confusion and fear. Decision-making and concentration are more difficult.

Several hours, several days or even weeks after the incident, delayed stress reactions may occur. The most common reaction is sleep disturbance - problems falling asleep, waking up or having repetitive dreams or nightmares. The fight-flight reaction has been fully activated during the critical incident and it can be difficult to calm down physically. Signs of physical tension include restlessness, headaches, changes in eating habits or gastric problems such as indigestion.

Concentration and short-term memory problems may interfere with carrying out daily tasks. Intrusive thoughts about the incident or flashbacks can also interfere. If there has been a personal threat or danger, you may feel unsafe or fearful that a similar event could happen again. You may feel on guard and alert to all kinds of possible threats. Changing the locks at home, checking over your shoulder or becoming overprotective of your children are examples of this type of behavior. This alertness is **normal** but it can be very demanding and draining. You may find yourself exhausted for no particular reason- but not be able to sleep well because of this state of alertness.

Emotional reactions include: sadness, grief, withdrawal, anxiety, feeling isolated or different from others who have not gone through a similar tragic experience. A very common emotional reaction is irritability and anger. The anger may be directed at the person who caused the situation, at a victim for being in the wrong situation at the wrong time, at the organization and colleagues for procedures, errors or lack of support or the anger may be directed at yourself. Survivor guilt may be experienced, particularly if a colleague or someone you feel responsible for has died or has been seriously harmed. Sometimes there is an almost obsessive need to talk about the incident or your experience. Again, this is a normal reaction as you try to master your intense feelings.

Guilt and second-guessing yourself may become prevalent. You may feel (unrealistically) responsible for what happened as if you somehow erred or misjudged a situation or failed in your responsibilities. Second-guessing yourself (e.g., what if I had... If only I had not...) is a common reaction if you are typically in a position of taking charge or looking after others' welfare. You may find you have become indecisive for a time or lose your usual confidence.

Another common reaction is a feeling of **powerlessness**, of not being in control, e.g., of something as important as the safety of your life. If you dwell on the feeling that you can't do anything about this, you may start to feel depressed. Unfortunately, some of us punish ourselves by thinking we get what we deserve. We may feel, if something bad has happened, it might be because we've brought it on ourselves or we may have helped it happen.

Other signs of a critical incident stress reaction which may, on the surface, seem less directly connected with the traumatic experienced, are: family problems or interpersonal conflicts; loss of interest in the job or previously enjoyed activities; increased use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs (particularly to help sleep), increased accidents and illness.

At the time of the incident and immediately after, it is helpful to be active, use physical exercise to help discharge the tension. It is important to look after your physical health so that you will have sufficient reserves to deal with the emotional stress. Get sufficient rest, eat nutritionally and avoid alcohol, caffeine and nicotine as much as possible. Talk to your family and friends about the incident and your feelings. They may not attach much importance to what has happened, or they may think that if they don't react too strongly it may help you get over it. It's hard for them to realize the effect this event has had on you. Letting them read this information will help them recognize and understand your experience.

Your recovery will occur in stages. Be prepared to experience **some** or **all** of the reactions outlined in this packet. You may feel you've mastered your intense feeling, only to find they come back from time to time. This is **normal**. You will find that with time you will become more detached from the event and will be more freely able to

choose to think about, or not think about, the incident. If you find that after 4 to 6 weeks you are still experiencing the stress reactions described, it would be helpful to seek professional trauma counseling.

**Remember:**

- You are having a natural reaction to an unnatural situation.
- You are not losing it, you are finding your sense of decency.
- You are not the only one experiencing these reactions right now.
- You are not, in fact, less capable or less competent.
- You may trust your judgment.
- You are not weak, a wimp or unstable.
- You are not alone.