

REACTIONS TO TRAUMATIC EVENTS**

Introduction

The purpose of this brochure is to provide information about emotional reactions that people often have in response to traumatic events. It describes thoughts and feelings that individuals typically experience after traumatic events and will answer questions frequently asked about emotional reactions under these circumstances. It also discusses strategies for coping with the emotional after-effects of this type of event, and suggests when it might be appropriate to seek professional help.

Common Reactions to Traumatic Events

Extremely stressful or traumatic events are those that involve a sudden overwhelming experience with threat to one's life, assault on one's physical self, or sudden and violent loss of another person. These may be brushes with death, severe injury, death of a co-worker, or witnessing a violent death or serious injury of a co-worker. At times, even hearing about these types of incidents, if they involve someone we know or feel close to, may cause an emotional reaction. Such responses are very common under these circumstances, and if they are not severe, or do not continue for a long period of time, should not cause concern.

Initial reactions (occurring at the time of the accident)

- A feeling of disbelief
- Feeling disoriented
- Feeling afraid
- Feeling that time is slowed down
- Feeling numb, or disconnected from others
- Feeling helpless, or, the opposite, feeling unafraid and not avoiding danger.

Later reactions (within weeks or months of the event)

- Being unable to get rid of unwanted thoughts or pictures of the event that come to mind
- Feeling like the incident is happening all over again (so-called “flashbacks”)
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep, or nightmares
- Being easily startled by sudden noises
- Having angry outbursts or being frequently irritable
- Feeling numb and detached, or withdrawing from others
- Being unable to enjoy your usual activities
- Having a hard time feeling close to people you love
- Having difficulties with intimacy or sexual performance
- Having difficulty concentrating at home or at work
- Worrying that another disaster will happen
- Feeling much worse, physically and emotionally, when you are in a situation that reminds you of the incident
- Having physical symptoms such as heart pounding, aches and pains, stomach and bowel distress
- Worrying that you could have done something differently to have changed the outcome of the incident
- Being unable to remember everything that happened
- Avoiding thoughts or situations that remind you of the event
- Overusing alcohol, medication or drugs

When many of these symptoms occur together for a long period of time (a month or more), it may be called "posttraumatic stress." The diagnosis of **posttraumatic stress** (PTSD) occurs in approximately 15-30% of people who go through a serious life-threatening, violent or assaultive situation.

Frequently Asked Questions

How long can these symptoms last?

Usually, the symptoms begin to improve within a few weeks. They usually become less frequent and less distressing over time. After some very traumatic events, and for some people, however, they may last a very long time (months or even years).

Will they be worse at particular times?

Yes. They may be worse when you are in a situation that reminds you of the incident. Reminders may include places, people, feelings, sequences of events, or time of day. It is also common to have symptoms intensify around the anniversary of the event. Sometimes the reminders may not be obvious, and you may have to think for a while to identify what triggered a strong reaction. Usually there is something, but not always.

What can I do to help myself?

Coping strategies that are helpful in recovering from a very stressful event such as the recent incident at your plant include:

- Get plenty of sleep and eat well.
- Exercise regularly.
- Decrease your use of alcohol and other substances such as coffee and cigarettes. These usually make people feel worse in the long run.
- Pay attention to your body and don't push yourself too hard.
- Plan leisure activities alone, and/or with friends and family.
- Assume that you will have lots of different feelings about the event and expect these for a period of time.
- Write down thoughts and feelings about the event.
- Recognize that each person needs to deal with the event differently and may take more or less time to "recover".
- Seek any information that you feel you need about what happened or how other people are doing

Should I talk to my family and friends about my reactions or about the event?

It is often helpful to talk to friends and family about what happened and about how you are feeling, and they can be very supportive. In addition to this being helpful to you, it may also be helpful to them. This is because it helps them understand how you are feeling and why you do or say certain things. On the other hand, at some point family and friends may no longer want to hear about the event or about your feelings, and they may expect you to “get over” it. At this point, it may be useful to find someone else to talk to, including a professional.

When should I seek help for my reactions?

When you feel the need. For some people, this may be close in time to the event, if they do not have others to talk to, or are having a very strong reaction. Others may wish to see if the distress diminishes with time. A rule of thumb is, if 3-6 months have gone by and you don't feel that things have improved greatly, if your symptoms seem out of control (e.g., suicidal thoughts), or if they interfere with your functioning at work or at home, you should strongly consider talking to a professional.

What kind of help should I seek?

Everyone is different. Some people prefer to turn to spiritual helpers in their community, such as a minister, priest, or rabbi. Others feel more comfortable going to someone they don't know, but who is trained in helping with emotional problems, such as a psychologist, psychiatrist, social worker, or counselor. These individuals may be found in Employee Assistance programs in industry, in labor, in community mental health centers, and in private practice. Mental health professionals are trained to talk with people about their concerns and problems and to help them understand their reactions and cope better. Psychiatrists are additionally trained in prescribing medications that may help with some of the symptoms, e.g., troubled sleep, depression. This help may be provided through individual therapy/counseling, or through counseling that includes a spouse, family or other individuals with similar problems.

Remember: Most people do recover but may have a different view of the world after experiencing a traumatic event. Powerful events have an emotional impact and are rarely forgotten. You are not alone in reacting to these events, and any problems that develop are understandable and treatable. As painful as these events may be, however, they can provide important lessons for those who have been through them.

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