

Common Stress Reactions To Difficult Events

Anyone that experiences a stressful event may experience one or more of these common signs and reactions. These are common reactions to a difficult event, and although painful, they are part of the healing process. The things listed in this brochure are not intended to interrupt the healing process by removing these uncomfortable reactions but instead are merely suggestions for how you might best support your loved ones following a difficult incident.

PHYSICAL/BODY

- fatigue
- muscle tremors/twitches
- nausea
- elevated blood pressure
- thirst
- nonspecific body complaints
- headaches
- loss or increase in appetite
- dizziness
- visual difficulties
- vomiting
- rapid heart rate
- weakness
- grinding of teeth
- chills
- profuse sweating
- fainting
- *difficulty breathing*
- *chest pain*
- *shock symptoms*

***Indicates need for medical evaluation**

COGNITIVE/MIND

- blaming someone
- confusion
- nightmares
- uncertainty
- suspiciousness
- poor concentration
- poor decision-making
- memory problems
- intrusive images
- poor problem solving
- poor abstract thinking
- disturbed thinking
- distressing dreams
- increased vigilance/watchfulness
- difficulty identifying familiar objects or people
- increased or decreased awareness of surroundings
- disorientation (time, place and/or person)
- react to criticism, as if attacked

EMOTIONS/FEELINGS

- anxiety
- guilt
- grief
- panic
- denial
- emotional shock
- fear
- uncertainty
- depression
- apprehension
- feeling overwhelmed
- emotional outbursts
- intense anger
- irritability
- agitation
- sadness
- feeling numb or cold
- denial of reality
- feeling isolated
- intense worry about others
- increased emotionality

BEHAVIORAL/ACTIONS

- change in socialization
- suspiciousness
- change in eating habits
- pacing
- inability to rest / relax
- sleep problems
- erratic movements
- less humor
- withdrawal/isolation (“others do not understand”)
- change in usual communications/speech
- increase in alcohol and/ or drug consumption
- change in sexual functioning
- hyperalert to environment (hypervigilance)

SPIRITUAL REACTIONS

- crisis of faith
- doubt
- preoccupation
- questioning beliefs or values Source:

International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Inc.



KENTUCKY COMMUNITY CRISIS RESPONSE TEAM

Strategies For Helping Your Significant Other Cope After a Critical Incident

Your loved one has been involved in an emotion-charged event, often known as a critical incident. He/she may experience common stress reactions to such an event (critical incident stress).

This brochure may assist you in providing support and seeking resources, if needed.

Provided by the Kentucky
Community Crisis Response Team
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Your loved one has experienced a critical incident (any event that causes unusually strong emotional reactions that has the potential to interfere with the ability to function normally). Even though the event may be over, he/she may now be experiencing, or may experience later, some emotional or physical reactions. It is very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience emotional after-shocks when they have passed through a horrible event.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the critical incident. 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. Research indicates that having a solid support system in the aftermath of a critical incident leads to improved prognosis and a better likelihood that the stress reactions will eventually resolve. Occasionally, the critical incident is so painful that professional assistance may be necessary. This does not imply weakness or a mental health issue. It's important to understand there are many factors that influence how an individual is impacted by a particular critical incident, and the type of incident and its magnitude is not always an indicator for how intensely it impacts someone.

Important things to remember about critical incident stress:

1. Reactions to critical incident stress may be physical, cognitive, emotional, behavioral and spiritual. Your loved one has received a handout outlining these reactions. (See Common Reaction- back panel.)
2. Your significant other may or may not experience any stress reactions.
3. Suffering from the effects of critical incident stress is common. Your loved one is probably not the only one having difficulty with the event.
4. All phases of our lives overlap and influence each other: personal, professional, family, etc. The impact of the critical incident can be intensified, influenced or mitigated by our own personal, family or current issues.
5. Encourage your loved one to talk about the incident and his/her reaction to it. Your primary job is to listen and reassure.
6. You may not understand what your significant other is going through at this time, but offer your love and support. Don't be afraid to ask what you can do that he/she would consider helpful.

Things To Do:

- Listen carefully.
- Spend time with your loved one.
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear, even if they have not asked for help.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Give them some private time.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.

Sources:

Adapted from Nancy Rich, M.A.; and International Critical Incident Stress Foundation, Inc., 2001

