



Coping with Traumatic Stress

Introduction

When people are confronted with sudden, frightening events like the recent SARS epidemic, World Wars, terrorists attacks, the September 11th 2001 attack on the World Trade Centre, the NASA flight disaster and other large scale traumatic events, they often experience intense emotional reactions, it is important to understand what these reactions are and ways to cope with them as you work to move on.

After the initial feelings of shock and numbness decrease, people can feel a variety of other reactions depending on their own temperaments and past experiences. The following response, although they are distressing, are normal reactions to traumatic events:

- Anxiety, nervousness, and irritability, these feelings may be intense and overwhelming
- Depression. You may feel overwhelmed by sadness and grief.
- Anger. You may find yourself arguing with family members, co-workers or overall you may feel more anger than normal.
- Mood swings. For some people these can be dramatic and unpredictable.
- Flashbacks. You may find yourself reliving portions of your experience. Flashbacks and vivid memories may come over you without warning. You may sweat or feel your heart racing while you are having flashbacks.
- Behaviour changes. You may find it difficult to concentrate or make a decision. You may forget parts of your ordinary daily routine, like brushing your teeth or preparing meals. You may forget to eat or not feel hungry. You may also find it hard to get to sleep or stay asleep.
- Physical changes, you may experience physical symptoms like headaches, stomach aches and fatigue.

As each individual is unique, response to situations varies from person to person. You may experience one or all of the above symptoms. They may resurface one at a time or all at once.



Ways to Cope

Here are some things you can do to help restore your sense of control and well-being:

- Get support from people you love and trust. Talking about the event can help you process it and feel more in control.
- Give yourself time. You have suffered from a tremendous shock and can't be expected to "bounce back" quickly. Be patient with yourself and ask others to be patient too.
- Try not to compare yourself with others. Everyone reacts differently to traumatic experiences.
- Avoid using alcohol or non-prescription drugs to handle your emotions.
- Take care of yourself. Eat well-balanced meals, get rest, and try to get some exercise.
- Write your feelings down. Some people find it helps to write down their feelings, especially before they go to bed.

How long does traumatic stress last?

The length of time traumatic stress lasts varies widely from person to person. It can be affected by the nature of your involvement with the traumatic event. When loss of life is involved it can take some time to move on. Each individual temperament and other stresses you may have in your life will affect the length of a traumatic stress reaction lasts.

Many people find that no matter how long it takes to regain a sense of emotional control, the anniversary of a traumatic experience can be very difficult to get through.