Coping with a Traumatic Event

Most everyone has been through a stressful event in his or her life.

Traumatic events are marked by a sense of horror, helplessness, serious injury or the threat of serious injury or death. Traumatic events affect survivors, rescue workers and the friends and relatives of victims who have been involved. They may also have an impact on people who have seen the event either firsthand or on television.

Crisis and Disaster

What Are Some Common Responses?

Responses include feelings of fear, grief, and depression. Physical and behavioral responses include nausea, dizziness, changes in appetite and sleep pattern, and withdrawal from daily activities. Responses to trauma can last for weeks to months before people start to feel normal again. Most people report feeling better within three months after a traumatic event. If the problems become worse or last longer than one month after the event, the person may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

What is PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an intense physical and emotional response to thoughts and reminders of the event that last for many weeks or months after the traumatic event. The symptoms of PTSD fall into three broad types: re-living, avoidance and increased arousal.

- **Symptoms of re-living** include flashbacks, nightmares, as well as extreme emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the event. Emotional reactions can include feelings of guilt, extreme fear of harm and numbing of emotions. Physical reactions can include uncontrollable shaking, chills or heart palpitations and tension headaches.
- **Symptoms of avoidance** include staying away from activities, places, thoughts or feelings related to the trauma or feeling detached or estranged from others.
- **Symptoms of increased arousal** can include being overly alert or easily startled, difficulty sleeping, irritability or outbursts of anger and/or a lack of concentration.
- Other symptoms linked with PTSD can include: panic attacks, depression, suicidal thoughts and feelings, drug abuse, feelings of being estranged and isolated, as well as not being able to complete daily tasks.

What Can You Do for Yourself?

- Understand that your symptoms may be normal, especially right after the trauma.
- Take the time to resolve day-to-day issues and conflicts, so they do not add to your stress and stick to your usual daily routine.
- Do not shy away from situations, people and places that remind you of the trauma.
- Find ways to relax and be kind to yourself. Participate in recreational activities you enjoy.
- Turn to family, friends and clergy for support and talk about your experiences and feelings with them.
- Recognize that you are not able to control everything.
- Recognize the need for trained help, and call a local mental health center.

When Should You Contact Your Doctor or Mental Health Professional?

About half of those with PTSD recover within three months without treatment. Sometimes symptoms do not go away on their own or they last for more than three months. This may happen because of the severity of the event, direct exposure to the traumatic event, seriousness of the threat to life, the number of times an event happened, a history of past trauma and psychological problems before the event. Consider seeking professional help if your symptoms affect your relationship with your family and friends or your job. If you suspect that you or someone you know has PTSD, talk with a health care provider or call your local mental health clinic.

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