Common Responses to Traumatic Events

Traumatic events can cause a variety of reactions, and usually affect people differently. Sometimes reactions happen immediately after experiencing or hearing about an event. You may feel fine for a number of days, even weeks, and then suddenly have a reaction. These reactions can last for a few days, weeks or sometimes months, depending upon your experience of the situation and/or your relationship with those who were involved with the traumatic event. Traumatic events can also have a ripple effect – family members, friends and co-workers may also affected.

It is important to remember that having some reaction is normal. Victor Frankl, a Nazi concentration camp survivor and author once said that "an abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior" (1951). Some of these normal reactions include.

PHYSICAL REACTIONS

- Disrupted sleep, nightmares
- Fatigue
- Irritability
- Anxiety
- Headaches
- Appetite disturbance
- Body pains (back, neck, stomach, etc.)

EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

- Heightened state of fear and vulnerability
- Anger
- Being easily startled
- Feelings of being overwhelmed
- Trouble concentrating
- Short term memory loss
- Irritability
- Withdrawal from normal activities
- Feeling detached from others
- Guilt
- Intrusive flashbacks or recollections about the event

THINGS THAT YOU CAN DO

- Maintain a normal and predictable routine for yourself and your family.
- Structure your time and keep busy.

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- Avoid trying to numb the pain by overusing drugs or alcohol.
- Don't isolate—talk with others and share your thoughts, feelings and experiences.
- Keep a journal, write a lot, especially at those times you can't sleep.
- Get plenty of rest and eat regular meals, even if you don't feel like it.
- Give yourself permission to understand that you are experiencing a "normal reaction" to an "abnormal event."
- Use physical exercise as a good outlet for your feelings.

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