

## Stressful Life Events

Stressful life events such as a serious injury, loss of a loved one or property, a serious threat, or an overwhelming emotional experience, are a part of life. Even though the event may be over, people may continue to experience out-of-character, strong emotional and physical reactions. It is human and natural for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have passed through an upsetting life event.

Emotional, behavioral and/or physical reactions can last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the event. With understanding and support, reactions can pass more quickly. Occasionally, the event is so painful that professional assistance may be helpful. This does not imply weakness or inability to cope. It does suggest that the event was just too powerful or overwhelming for the person to manage by themselves. Seeking assistance indicates the courage to find solutions in a difficult, challenging situation.

Below are some natural and distressing reactions following from stressful events.

### Thinking

- Slowed thinking
- Difficulty making decisions
- Difficulty problem solving
- Confusion
- Perceptual distortions (especially time)
- Difficulty calculating
- Difficulty concentrating
- Memory problems
- Difficulty naming objects
- Seeing the event over & over
- Distressing dreams
- Poor attention span
- Freeze frame mental images

### Physical

- Nausea
- Upset stomach
- Tremors (lips, hands)
- Feeling uncoordinated
- Profuse sweating
- Chills
- Diarrhea
- Dizziness
- Chest pain (should check at hospital)
- Rapid heartbeat
- Rapid breathing
- Increased blood pressure
- Muscle aches
- Sleep disturbance

## Emotional

Anxiety  
Hypervigilance  
Guilt  
Grief  
Depression  
Sadness  
Feeling lost  
Feeling abandoned  
Feeling isolated  
Feeling nothing, numb  
Worry about others  
Wanting to hide, escape  
Anger; lashing out at people  
Headaches

Irritability, startled  
Shocked  
Wanting to limit contact with others

## Spiritual

Experiencing meaninglessness  
Feeling betrayed  
Hyper-religiosity  
Retreating to seclusion  
Feeling abandonment  
One's dream being shattered  
Reassessing ultimate beliefs  
Distrust /Lack of trust  
Uprooted/Disconnected  
Guilt (Am I being punished?)

## What Can I Do?

The following activities can help reduce, not eliminate, painful reactions.

### For Yourself

- Try to rest a bit more, yet maintain a normal schedule
- Deep breathing to activate relaxation
- Talk about your experience and feelings with people who care about you and respect your privacy. Consider having somebody stay with you for companionship for periods of time.
- Fight against boredom and engage in pleasant activities even when you don't feel like it.
- Keep a reasonable activity level – physical activity is often helpful.
- Recurring thoughts, images, dreams or flashbacks are a normal reaction. Don't try to fight them – they'll decrease over time and become less painful.
- Eat well balanced and regular meals (even when you don't feel like it).
- If feelings become prolonged or too intense, find a counselor with whom you feel comfortable.

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## For Family Members and Friends

- Listen carefully.
- Spend time, provide companionship; minimize isolation.
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear even if they have not asked for help. Many times providing support, even when silent, is helpful.
- Reassure them that they are safe now.
- Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, minding children, etc.
- Allow some private time.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't tell them that they are "lucky" it wasn't worse. People are not consoled by those types of statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to support and assist them.