

TRAUMATIC STRESS SYNDROME

You have experienced a traumatic event. Even though the event maybe over, you may now be experiencing, or may experience later, some strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common, in fact quite normal for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have passed through a horrible event.

Sometimes the emotional aftershocks (or stress reactions) appear immediately after the critical incident (traumatic event). 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 or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the event. With the understanding and the support of loved ones, stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally, the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be necessary. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular trauma was just too powerful to manage without help.

Here are some very common signs and signals of a stress reaction:

PHYSICAL SIGNS

- Fatigue
- Nausea
- Muscle tremors
- Twitches
- Chest pain
- Difficulty breathing
- Elevated BP
- Rapid heart rate
- Thirst
- Visual difficulties
- Vomiting
- Grinding of teeth
- Weakness
- Dizziness
- Profuse sweating
- Chills

- Shock symptoms
- Fainting

COGNITIVE SIGNS

- Blaming someone
- Confusion
- Poor attention
- Poor decisions
- Heightened or lowered alertness
- Poor concentration
- Memory problems
- Hypervigilance
- Difficulty identifying familiar objects or people
- Increased or decreased awareness of surroundings
- Poor problem solving
- Poor abstract thinking
- Loss of time, place, or person orientation
- Disturbed thinking
- Nightmares
- Intrusive images

EMOTIONAL SIGNS

- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Grief
- Denial
- Severe panic (rare)
- Emotional shock
- Fear
- Uncertainty
- Loss of emotional control
- Depression
- Inappropriate emotional response
- Apprehension
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Intense anger
- Irritability
- Agitation

BEHAVIORAL SIGNS

- Change in activity
- Change in speech patterns
- Withdrawal
- Emotional outbursts
- Suspiciousness
- Change in usual communications
- Loss or increase of appetite
- Alcohol consumption
- Inability to rest
- Antisocial acts
- Nonspecific bodily complaints
- Hyperalert to environment
- Startle reflex intensified
- Pacing
- Erratic movements
- Change in sexual functioning

Individuals who have experienced a traumatic event oftentimes suffer psychological stress related to the critical incident. In most instances, **these are normal reactions to abnormal situations**. Individuals who feel they are unable to regain control of their lives, or who experience the following symptoms for more than a month, should consider seeking outside professional mental health assistance.

- Recurring thoughts or nightmares about the event.
- Having trouble sleeping or changes in appetite.
- Experiencing anxiety and fear, especially when exposed to events or situations reminiscent of the trauma.
- Being on edge, being easily startled or becoming overly alert.
- Feeling depressed, sad and having low energy.
- Experiencing memory problems including difficulty in remembering aspects of the trauma.
- Feeling "scattered" and unable to focus on work or daily activities. Having

difficulty making decisions.

-- Feeling irritable, easily agitated, or angry and resentful.

-- Feeling emotionally "numb," withdrawn, disconnected or different from others.

-- Spontaneously crying, feeling a sense of despair and hopelessness.

-- Feeling extremely protective of, or fearful for, the safety of loved ones.

-- Not being able to face certain aspects of the trauma, and avoiding activities, places, or even people that remind you of the event.