

# There's Something You Should Know . . .

A guide to  
Critical Incident Stress Management  
compiled by the  
Macomb Emergency Response Group

## WHAT TO EXPECT AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT

You have been exposed to a traumatic event. As a result, you *may* experience noticeable changes in the way you feel, think, and behave. This may be occurring now or could occur later in the days, weeks, or even months to come. These symptoms of stress are simply **normal** reactions that **normal** people have to an **abnormal** event. Some of the most typical reactions are listed below:

PHYSICAL	Nausea	Chest pain (see a physician)	Fatigue
	Upset stomach	Headaches	Inability to relax
	Diarrhea	Increased blood pressure	Less coordinated
	Tremors (lips, hands)	Rapid heartbeat	Dry mouth
	Chills	Rapid breathing	Profuse sweating
	Muscle aches	Dizziness	Involuntary twitches
	Lowered immunity	Changes in appetite	
THOUGHT	Intrusive images	Difficulty concentrating	Disorientation (to place & time)
	Nightmares	Difficulty making decisions	Confusion
	Flashbacks	Difficulty solving problems	Slowed thinking
	Lowered attention span	Difficulty with calculations	Memory problems
	Disbelief	Increased worry	Suspiciousness
	Blaming self or others	Denial	
EMOTIONAL	Fear	Feeling vulnerable	Feeling powerless
	Anticipatory anxiety	Feeling lost	Feeling panicky
	Survivor guilt	Feeling abandoned	Identifying with victim(s)
	Depression/despair	Feeling isolated	Sadness
	Grief	Feeling numb	Loss of motivation
	Anger	Feeling hopeless	Temporary euphoria
	Irritability	Feeling overwhelmed	
BEHAVIORAL	Crying	Startle reactions	Excessive humor
	Withdrawal	Changes in communicating	Changes in behavior
	Hyper-vigilance	Changes in social interaction	
	Sleep disturbances	Increased alcohol intake	
	Changes in food intake	Increased smoking	
	Changes in activity	Excessive silence	

Just as you would allow yourself time to recover from a physical injury, it is important to accept your reactions and allow the time you need to recover from your experience. This time will vary with each individual. Occasionally the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance may be necessary. This does not imply “craziness” or weakness; it simply indicates that this particular tragic event is just too powerful to manage alone.

*The Macomb County Crisis Center is available at (586) 307-9100. The Crisis Center provides free telephone counseling, information, or referrals for on-going assistance.*

## NUTRITION AND STRESS

Exposure to stressful situations is physically harmful to your body. When in a crisis state, your body releases cortisol and adrenalin. Cortisol accelerates the formation of plaque in the circulatory system and stimulates fat storage causing cholesterol build-up and weight gain. Adrenalin can raise VLDL cholesterol and cause arteries to spasm, which could over time lead to a heart attack.

Certain food help repair the cellular damage caused by emotional trauma and stress by producing “healing” chemicals in the body such as serotonin, tryptophan, and endorphin.

Other foods delay your physical recovery and cause you to feel numb, anxious, or jittery. Too much sugar can make you irritable, hyperactive, and eventually depressed. Also, it is best to avoid eating large quantities of meat or fatty foods because your body will divert a lot of your energy to digest them. This will hinder restful sleep and interfere with cellular repair.

What you eat makes a difference in how quickly you rebuild your physical strength and immunity. This is why it is important to eat “helpful foods” when you’ve been exposed to a stressful event.

HELPFUL
Warm milk
Turkey
Pasta
Asparagus
Cabbage
Corn
Squash
Yams
Brown rice
Vitamins C, B Complex, or B6
Water
(always stay hydrated)

NOT HELPFUL
Sugar
Alcohol
Chocolate milk
Peanut butter
Pickled or marinated foods
Cheese
Sunflower and pumpkin seeds
Caffeinated beverages (coffee, tea, hot chocolate, soft drinks)
Smoked and processed meats (hot dogs, bologna, sausage)
MSG (in many processed and Chinese foods)



## HOW CAN YOU HELP YOURSELF

- Talk with people you trust. Talking is a very healing activity
- Recognize that some people will not know what to say. If anyone you talk with says things that are not helpful, seek out someone else. Sometimes, solace is best found with others who shared the same experience
- Avoid isolating yourself
- Tears are okay. Allowing yourself to cry can be one of the healthiest and most efficient ways to get back in control.
- Give someone a hug. Touch is very important
- Re-establish a normal schedule as soon as possible, but don't push yourself too hard. Allow yourself time to recover from your experience.
- Take one thing at a time. Give yourself permission to be less productive for a while.
- Eat balanced and regular meals (even if you don't feel like it). Avoid any increased intake of caffeine, salt, sugar, or alcohol.
- Schedule a full 8 hours of sleep for yourself.
- Realize that intrusive thoughts, images, and flashbacks are normal. Don't fight them; allow them to run their natural course. They will decrease over time and become less painful.
- Increase your level of physical activity. Exercise helps to accelerate physical and emotional recovery.
- Recognize that guilt, anger, or the need to blame are normal and temporary human reactions to what you experienced.

## WHAT TO EXPECT FOR THE NEAR FUTURE

*Following is what you may expect as your recovery from a critical incident continues:*

- Trauma reactions will decrease in intensity and frequency.
- Persons who are close to you may become co-survivors through their caring and involvement during your recovery. This is a natural development, but recognize that they may also need support from others.
- You may experience fluctuations between feeling in control and feeling anxious or overwhelmed.
- You may question pre-trauma assumptions and beliefs about life.
- Flashbacks are a normal response after experiencing a traumatic event. They usually involve a vivid replay of the event and/or the emotions which accompanied it. They may be triggered by anything that reminds you of the incident (like sights, sounds, smells, news of a similar incident, significant dates). You may not always be aware of what triggered the response. Flashbacks will fade with time.

## HOW TO DETERMINE IF PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE IS NEEDED

*No two individuals are alike, so the point at which professional help is needed can vary greatly. To make your determination, consider the guidelines below:*

Generally, you should seek professional assistance if ....

- you see your life falling apart (marital problems, family conflict, loss of friendships, problems at work or school);
- you suffer chronic physical problems and no organic cause can be found;
- you are preoccupied with thoughts about the event;
- you feel desperately lonely and scared;
- you have difficulty concentrating and are unable to make decisions;
- you have feelings of hopelessness, severe depression, or rage;
- you rely on alcohol or other drugs to block pain

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## PROVEN STRESS REDUCERS

1. Get up 15 minutes earlier in the morning. Leave time to be early for appointments. Unexpected delays will be less stressful.
2. Don't rely on your memory. Write down appointment times, due dates, etc.  
"The palest ink is better than the most retentive memory" – Old Chinese Proverb
3. Learn to delegate responsibility to others who are capable.
4. Plan ahead. Don't let the gas tank get below  $\frac{1}{4}$  full. Don't wait until you're down to your last postage stamp to buy more.
5. Don't put up with something that doesn't work right. If your alarm clock, billfold, shoelaces, windshield wipers, or whatever are a constant aggravation, repair or replace them.
6. Be prepared to wait. A paperback can make waiting in a post office line more bearable.
7. If an especially unpleasant task faces you, do it early in the day and get it over with. Then the rest of the day will be free of that anxiety.
8. Simplify, simplify, simplify.
9. Make friends with non-worriers. Nothing gets you into the habit of worrying faster than associating with a chronic worrier.
10. For every one thing that goes wrong, there are probably 10 to 50 or 100 things that go right. Be aware of them.
11. Putting things off is stressful. Whatever you want to do tomorrow, do today; whatever you want to do today, do now.
12. Become more flexible. Recognize you may need to change your expectations of others. Remember the only person you can control is *you*.
13. Eliminate destructive self-talk: "I'm too old to ..., I'm too fat to ..., etc.
14. Take care of the todays as best as you can and the tomorrows will take care of themselves.
15. Create order out of chaos. Organize your home and workspace so you always know exactly where items are. A place for everything and everything in its place helps to lower stress.
16. Forget about counting to 10. Count to 1,000 before you do or say anything that will make matters worse.
17. Relax your expectations. Some things are really *not* worth doing perfectly; some issues are best resolved with compromise.
18. Focus your energy on one thing at a time.
19. Have a forgiving view of people and events. Accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world.
20. Instant Stress Reliever:
  - a. Draw a full breath through your nose.
  - b. Exhale s-l-o-w-l-y through your mouth, drop your shoulders, and allow all of your muscles to relax. Notice the tension leave your body.
  - c. Repeat.



## HOW OTHERS CAN BE HELPFUL TO YOU

*(for your family and friends to read)*

Someone you care about has been exposed to a traumatic incident and may experience some noticeable changes in their health, thinking, emotions, and behavior. These are **normal** reactions that people have to an abnormal event. Following are some ways in which you can be supportive during their recovery.

- Offer to listen. Don't minimize what they are saying or tell them they are lucky it wasn't worse. Instead, tell them you are sorry this happened and you want to help.
- Don't press for details about the incident or attempt to impose your explanation on why this event occurred.
- It's not necessary to try to make things better. Be willing to say nothing. The best way to support them is to let them know you are there and that you care.
- Spend time with your loved one(s), but also allow them some private time.
- Be accepting of their emotions.
- Touch is very important for recovery. Offer them a hug, an arm around the shoulder, or a pat on the hand.
- Help them with everyday tasks
- Don't push them too hard.
- Offer to go on a walk or exercise with them. Encourage healthy choices with nutrition.
- Encourage your loved one to get a full 8 hours of sleep nightly.
- Try not to take their anger or other negative feelings personally.
- Share your feelings with other friends and family. Although you are not a direct survivor of the trauma, you may become a co-survivor through your caring and involvement.
- If their stress symptoms persist without improvement for over four weeks, encourage them to seek professional assistance. Also, consider finding help for yourself. Contact **The Macomb County Crisis Center at (586) 307-9100**. The Crisis Center provides free telephone counseling, information, or referrals for on-going assistance.

## GRIEF EMOTIONS ACTUALLY SERVE A PURPOSE

*The emotions that accompany a great loss can be overwhelming. Some people try to deal with the pain by seeking medication, busywork, excessive entertainment, or other diversions to avoid the feelings involved. This would be like managing a fire in your home by simply stepping into another room. Unfortunately, these avoidance methods do nothing to heal the pain and will only delay your recovery process.*

*The fastest way to recover is to simply allow yourself to freely experience the emotions that come naturally. These emotions, which help you to mentally process the loss, are perfectly normal and will fade with time. It is also helpful to talk these feelings out with people you trust.*

*Following are some typical grief emotions and the practical purposes they serve in helping you to heal from a serious loss:*

Emotion	Healing Purpose
<b>Numb and Stunned</b>	This phase allows you time to get a sense of safety, security, and survival back by keeping the brain as calm, clear and logical as possible
<b>Disarray</b>	Once your sense of safety, security, and survival return, your emotions start to rise to the surface and you may find it too difficult to concentrate and stay focused on anything. This leads you to reexamine and start mentally digesting the event or loss that occurred.
<b>Anger and/or Anxiety</b>	Anger is a sign that there's a more primary emotion you are struggling with (for example, abandonment or betrayal). This phase helps empower you to seek out supportive people who you can trust.
<b>Longing, Searching, Pining</b>	It's natural to want things the way they were before the loss. The phase starts you on the path to facing realities, so you can begin making adjustments in your life.
<b>Anguish</b>	Anguish is often a product of anger and love. This involves intensely missing the person and feeling the loss in your life. This pain presents the greatest challenge to your spirit, yet can motivate you to regain a peaceful reconciliation with your life. Anguish may revisit you from time to time, but its intensity will diminish. Eventually, painful memories will give way to the happy memories

*Naturally, if intense emotions persist over time or keep you from functioning, please seek professional assistance. Contact **The Macomb County Crisis Center at (586) 307-9100**. The Crisis Center provides free telephone counseling, information, or referrals for on-going assistance.*



# STAGES OF GRIEF

*Following are the five stages of grief that most individuals experience after the loss of someone close to them. These stages do not necessarily follow in this order, and it is not unusual for some stages to recur during the grief process. There is no right or wrong way to grieve.*

## **Denial**

Upon initial impact, survivors may find it difficult to believe the death has actually occurred. They may waver back and forth with the reality of their loss. It is common for emotional numbness and shock to accompany denial.

## **Anger**

In this stage, survivors may blame and become angry with themselves or others for their loss. They may believe that someone caused, or should have prevented, the death. Anger is often misdirected and could target God, medical personnel, relatives, or others perceived to have been responsible for the well-being of the deceased.

## **Bargaining**

Bargaining describes the way survivors make a deal with themselves (or God) in an attempt to indefinitely delay the pain of their loss. An example of bargaining is when a survivor begins working sixty hours a week in order to be "too busy" or "too tired" to deal with the overwhelming emotional pain of their grief. Bargaining is common and generally short-lived.

## **Depression**

The Depression Stage is the most emotionally painful stage of grief and it is often felt during other stages. When depressed, it is difficult for survivors to focus on and perform their regular daily routine.

## **Acceptance**

During this stage, survivors are left with a general sadness, but are no longer consumed by despair. Renewed interest is displayed in themselves, other people, activities, and life in general.