

Tip sheet: Common Reactions to Extreme Stress

When extreme stress occurs, regardless of the cause, some individuals will experience reactions that are out of the ordinary for them. The event may create an acute stress response that can disrupt physical and psychological processes. These reactions are typical and the experience is not uncommon.

Stressful events affect each person differently. Sometimes reactions appear immediately after the event. Sometimes they appear a few hours or a few days later. In some cases, weeks or months may pass before reactions appear. Acute stress symptoms can last days, weeks, months and occasionally longer, depending on the severity of the event or situation. Some of the more common responses to extreme stress include:

Cognitive reactions

- Confusion/difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty making decisions
- Decreased alertness
- Memory lapses
- Frequent thoughts of the event
- Emotional reactions
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Emotional numbness
- Apathy/boredom
- Frustration

Physical reactions

- Fatigue
- Insomnia
- Headaches
- Nausea/gastrointestinal problems
- Hunger or loss of appetite

Behavioral reactions

- Withdrawal from others
- Restlessness
- Hypervigilance
- Blaming others
- Substance use
- Changes in regular activities

Practical tips to help you cope

- **Find someone you trust.** Find supportive people (family members, friends or colleagues) and talk with them about your experience. Don't carry this burden alone – share it with those who care about you.
- **Give yourself permission to feel.** Acknowledge your feelings as they arise and that they are common reactions.
- **Take care of yourself.** Get enough rest and eat regularly. Keep up your exercise routine if you have one. Don't abuse drugs or alcohol – they can hinder your coping abilities.
- **Know your limits.** Avoid other stressful situations for a while.
- **Practice relaxation.** Meditate if you know how; if not, visualize a quiet scene. You may not always be able to get away physically, but you can hold a vision in your mind that will temporarily take you out of the turmoil of a stressful situation.
- **Take one thing at a time.** For people under tension, assignments or responsibilities may suddenly seem overwhelming. You can work through this temporary condition, one step at a time.
- **Remember you can always seek professional help.** You don't have to go through this experience alone. Sometimes a situation is so complicated or stressful that professional mental health assistance may be helpful.

Find more information at www.1in5.info