

## **When a Trauma Occurs**

A traumatic event, by definition, overwhelms your everyday coping mechanisms. You may feel raw, numb, and/or overwhelmed. You may experience fear, guilt, anger, shame, anxiety, and vulnerability, either separately or together such that it is hard to identify a single reaction.

You may struggle with questions like "how could this have happened," "why did this happen," "what does this mean to the rest of my life," "will something like this happen again?" You may fear that no where is safe, no activity is safe, no person is safe. You may find yourself thinking about other losses and other traumas. These feelings, questions, and thoughts are all common and normal.

Sometimes the stress reactions will appear immediately after the event. Other times they will appear a few days or weeks or months later. Sometimes you will have only one of the reactions, other times you will have many of them. Some of the reactions will diminish in a few days, others will stay for weeks or months. Any or all of these reactions are common and normal responses to a traumatic event or situation. With self care, along with understanding and support from loved ones, the stress reactions generally diminish with time. Sometimes the event is so difficult to cope with that professional assistance is necessary to reestablish daily functioning.

Many people benefit from talking with an after-trauma professional about the impact of the trauma and ways to understand and cope with it. Many also call the 24-hour Crisisline where they speak anonymously to a counselor about what they are experiencing 1-800-SUICIDE.

Below are some of the ways people are commonly affected by traumatic events:

### **OUR MINDS**

- Seeing the event over and over
- Seeing the deceased as they were before the event
- Difficulty with
  - common words
  - concentration
  - decision-making
  - memory
  - numbers
  - thinking
- Suspiciousness
- Thoughts of blame
- Confusion
- Disorientation
- Hyper-alertness

### **OUR BODIES**

- Weakness
- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Chest pain
- Teeth grinding
- Muscle tremors
- Chills/sweating
- Dizziness/faintness
- Increase in colds, allergies, flu, illness
- Nausea/vomiting
- Diarrhea
- Numbness/tingling
- Difficulty breathing
- Changes in blood pressure

- Nightmares
- Denial
- Thoughts that others may be in danger

#### **OUR FEELINGS**

- Moodiness
- Depression
- Panic
- Feeling:
  - angry
  - irritable
  - abandoned
  - agitated
  - anxious
  - apprehensive
  - fearful
  - grief
  - guilty
  - isolated
  - lost
  - overwhelmed
  - sadness
  - worried
  - numb

- Problems with vision

#### **OUR BEHAVIORS**

- Antisocial acts
- Avoidance of
  - persons
  - places
  - things
- Change in
  - eating
  - sexual activity
  - sleep
  - speech patterns
- Increased startle reflex
- Increase in smoking, alcohol/drug use
- Inability to rest
- Pacing

#### **HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF AFTER TRAUMA**

- talk to people who care about you
- spend time with family and friends each day
- try to rest a bit more than usual
- recurring thoughts, flashbacks, or dreams are normal, don't try to fight them - they'll decrease and become less painful over time
- maintain as normal a schedule as possible - don't overload yourself or leave too much empty time
- avoid using alcohol and drugs to relieve your pain
- eat healthy meals (even when you don't feel like it)
- engage in some physical activity/exercise (even if you don't feel like it)
- reestablish your normal schedule as soon as possible
- call the 24 hour Crisisline when you would like to talk anonymously about your feelings, thoughts, or experiences.
- meet with an after-trauma professional to learn more about the impact of traumatic death on the survivors and about ways to manage the impact.