

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMATIC STRESS RESPONSES

Washington State Employee Assistance Program

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You have just had a terrible experience. Whether you were involved in the traumatic incident yourself or you are a coworker, family member or friend, you are experiencing very powerful emotional stress. This stress level is far beyond what you are expected to cope with in your normal daily living. That is why some difficult physical and/or emotional reactions or responses are to be expected. These reactions are normal responses to a highly stressful and abnormal event. These reactions may be difficult, but it is important to understand that they are normal. Others are having similar responses.

What are the common stress responses?

- Physical changes may include fatigue, headaches, heartburn, difficulty sleeping, nightmares, and loss or increase in appetite.
- Emotional and mental responses include confusion, anxiety, fear, denial or numbness, despair, depression, anger, outrage, grief, withdrawal, and feelings of helplessness. Poor concentration, flashbacks, and intrusive thoughts are also common, normal responses.

When will I feel these things, and how long will they last?

- They usually happen immediately and over time the stress responses will change in intensity, frequency, duration and character.
- The time it takes for emotional “wounds” to heal varies. Much like the flu, traumatic stress reactions must run their course. No one can deny that this is a difficult experience, but it is important to know the reactions are normal and will ease in time.

What can I do to feel better?

- The passing of time will help and talking things out will help too. In fact, it is crucial that you “talk out” your experiences. Withdrawal and “sealing over” can make things worse. Talk it out with loved ones, peers, friends, clergy, EAP or counselors – anyone who cares and is a good listener.
- Avoid alcohol and drug abuse. Alcohol is a depressant and both alcohol and drugs can prolong the pain of the traumatic event.
- Take good care of yourself by eating healthy foods, exercising (within your limits), getting plenty of rest and staying in touch with people who care.

What if I begin to feel worse?

- Sometimes intensity of your reactions may increase or a reaction may be very prolonged. This does not mean that you are weak or going “crazy.” It simply means that the event was so powerful that it pushed you far past your normal coping experiences. If things worsen, seek help from someone who can assist you.

