

Jeffrey T. Mitchell, Ph.D.

## TRAUMATIC EVENTS INFORMATION SHEET

You have experienced a traumatic event (an injury, loss of a loved one or property or a serious threat, or any overwhelming emotional experience). Even though the event may be completed, 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 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 traumatic event. With understanding and the support of loved ones, the 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 traumatic event was just too powerful for the person to manage by themselves.

Here are some very common signs and symptoms of a stress reaction in a traumatized person:

| <b><u>Physical</u></b>   | <b><u>Thinking</u></b>     | <b><u>Emotional</u></b>  |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Nausea                   | Slowed thinking            | Anxiety                  |
| Upset Stomach            | Difficulty making          | Fear                     |
| Tremors (lips, hands)    | decisions                  | Guilt                    |
| Feeling uncoordinated    | Difficulty in problem-     | Grief                    |
| Profuse sweating         | solving                    | Depression               |
| Chills                   | Confusion                  | Sadness                  |
| Diarrhea                 | Disorientation (especially | Feeling lost             |
| Dizziness                | to place and time)         | Feeling abandoned        |
| Chest pain (should be    | Difficulty calculating     | Feeling isolated         |
| checked at hospital)     | Difficulty concentrating   | Worry about others       |
| Rapid heart beat         | Memory problems            | Wanting to hide          |
| Rapid breathing          | Difficulty naming common   | Wanting to limit contact |
| Increased blood pressure | Seeing the event over &    | with others              |
| Headaches                | over                       | Anger                    |
| Muscle aches             | Distressing dreams         | Irritability             |
| Sleep disturbances, etc  | Poor attendance span, etc. | Feeling numb             |
|                          |                            | Startled                 |
|                          |                            | Shock                    |
|                          |                            | Etc.                     |

## Traumatic Event

### Helpful Hints

Trying some of the following hints may help to alleviate the emotional pain associated with a traumatic event:

#### **For Yourself**

- Try to rest a bit more
- Contact friends
- Have someone stay with you for at least a few hours or period for a day or so
- Recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal – don't try to fight them – they'll decrease over time and become less painful
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even when you don't feel like it)
- Try to keep a reasonable level of activity
- Fight against boredom
- Physical activity is often helpful
- Re-establish a normal schedule as soon as possible
- Express your feelings as they arise
- Talk to people who love you
- Find a good counselor if the feelings become prolonged or too intense.

#### **For Family Members & Friends**

- Listen carefully
- Spend time with the traumatized person
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear even if they
- Reassure them that they are safe
- Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, minding children
- Give them some private time
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally
- Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse" – traumatized people are not consoled by those statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and assist them.

If the symptoms described above are severe or if they last longer than six weeks, the traumatized person may need professional counseling.

Contact a private practice psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker or your local community mental health center or community health department for assistance.

The information on this sheet has been prepared by Jeffrey T. Mitchell, Ph.D. of the University of Maryland's Emergency Health Services Program.

## HELPING YOURSELF

When stress does occur, it is important to recognize and deal with it. Here are some suggestions for ways to handle stress. As you begin to understand more about how stress affects, you, as an individual, you will come up with your own ideas of helping to ease the tensions.

- **Try physical activity.** When you are nervous, angry, or upset, release the pressures through exercise or physical activity. Running, walking, playing tennis, or working in your garden are just some of the activities you might try. Physical exercise will relieve that “up tight” feeling, relax you, and turn the frowns into smiles. Remember, your body and your mind work together.
- **Share your stress.** It helps to talk to someone about your concerns and worries. Perhaps a friend, family member, teacher, or counselor can help you see your problem in a different light. If you feel your problem is serious, you might seek professional help from a psychologist, psychiatrist, or social worker. Knowing when to ask for help may avoid some more serious problems later.
- **Know your limits.** If a problem is beyond your control and cannot be changed at the moment, don’t fight the situation. Learn to accept what is –for now—until such time when you can change it.
- **Take care of yourself.** You are special. Get enough rest and eat well. If you are irritable and tense from lack of sleep or if you are not eating correctly, you will have less ability to deal with stressful situations. If stress repeatedly keeps you from sleeping, you should ask your doctor for help.
- **Make time for fun.** Schedule time for both work and recreation. Play can be just as important to your well-being as work; you need a break from your daily routine to just relax and have fun.
- **Be a participant.** One way to keep from getting bored, sad, and lonely is to go where it’s all happening. Sitting alone can make you feel frustrated. Instead of feeling sorry for yourself, get involved and become a participant. Offer your services in neighborhood or volunteer organizations. Help yourself by helping other people. Get involved in the world and the people around you, and you’ll find they will be attracted to you. You’re on your way to making new friends and enjoying new activities.
- **Check off your tasks.** Trying to take care of everything at once can seem overwhelming; and as a result, you may not accomplish anything. Instead, make a list of what tasks you have to do, then do one at a time, checking them off as they’re completed. Give priority to the most important ones and do those first.
- **Must you always be right?** Do other people upset you – particularly when they don’t do things your way? Try cooperation instead of confrontation; it’s better than fighting and always being “right.” A little give and take on both sides will reduce the strain and make you both feel more comfortable.
- **It’s o.k. to cry.** A good cry can be a healthy way to bring relief to your anxiety, and it might even prevent a headache or other physical consequence. Take some deep breaths; they also release tension.
- **Create a quiet scene.** You can’t always run away, but you can “dream the impossible dream.” A quiet country scene painted mentally, or on canvas, can take you out of the

turmoil of a stressful situation. Change the scene by reading a good book or playing beautiful music to create a sense of peace and tranquility.

- **Avoid self-medication.** Although you can use drugs to relieve stress temporarily, drugs do not remove the conditions that caused the stress in the first place. Drugs, in fact, may be habit-forming and create more stress than they take away. They should be taken only on the advice of your doctor.

## **THE ART OF RELAXATION**

The best strategy for avoiding stress is to learn how to relax. Unfortunately many people try to relax at the same pace that they lead the rest of their lives. For a while, tune out your worries about time, productivity, and “doing right.” You will find satisfaction in just being, without striving. Find activities that give you pleasure and that are good for your mental and physical well-being. Forget about always winning. Focus on relaxation, enjoyment, and health. Be good to yourself.

---

Written by Louis E. Kopolow, M.D.