

Normal Reactions Experienced

SHOCK

- Disbelief at what has happened
- Numbness, the event may seem unreal, like a dream.
- Slow comprehension of what has happened.

FEARS

- Of damage to oneself, or death.
- Of a recurrence of the event.
- Awareness of personal vulnerability.
- Panicky irrational feelings – other apparently unrelated fears.

ANGER

- At who caused it or “allowed it to happen”.
- Outrage at what happened.
- At the injustice and senselessness of it all – generalised anger and irritability.

HELPLESSNESS

- Crises show up human powerlessness, as well as strength.

SADNESS

- About human destruction, and losses of every kind.
- For loss of belief that the world is safe and predictable

SHAME

- For having been exposed as helpless, “emotional” and needing others.
- For not having reacted as one would have wished.

These reactions are common. Expressing them allows nature to heal. They usually only last for a short period of time and gradually diminish over the first few weeks. Different reactions may be dominant as time goes by.

Effects on Behaviour

The effects can be expressed in many ways and in various combinations.

TENSION

- More easily startled, general agitation, physical or mental.

SLEEP DISTURBANCES

- Inability to sleep, thoughts that prevent sleep, replaying the incident.

DREAMS AND NIGHTMARES

- Of the incident or other vivid and frightening events.

FEARFULNESS

- Of the place, or reminders of the incident.

INTRUSIVE MEMORIES & FEELINGS

- Interfere with concentration, daily life.
- Flashbacks.
- Attempts to shut them out which leads to deadening of feelings and thoughts.

IRRITABILITY

- Frequent mood swings.

DEPRESSION

- About the event or past events.
- Non-specific depression.
- Guilt about how one behaved.

SOCIAL WITHDRAWAL

- A need to be alone.

PHYSICAL SENSATIONS

- Tiredness, palpitations, tremors, breathing difficulties, headaches, tense muscles, aches and pains, loss of appetite, loss of sexual interest, nausea, diarrhoea or constipation and many

other symptoms.

DELAYED EFFECTS

- Any of these effects may occur after months or years of satisfactory adjustment.

These physical and emotional symptoms are normal. Such reactions seem to be a form of self-protection that is automatic and is often beyond one's control. Expressing them allows nature to heal.

Why these reactions persist

We tend to believe we are invulnerable. Critical incidents are an unexpected threat to our security and can affect our view of the world and ourselves. This threat leads to various anxiety reactions.

Recovery

For some, recovery from a critical incident may be brief. For others, there may be no reaction at first, but problems may arise later on. In some cases, it may take many months to recover. Generally it takes a few weeks for people to regain their confidence. Recovery depends on the incident, the individual and the resources available to that person.

Returning to work

It is generally better to return to work as soon as possible. Getting back to normal routines and contact with colleagues helps to put the event in perspective. In some cases it may help to take a day or two off work, but if there are few social supports outside work, time off can be detrimental.

How you can help yourself

- Try to get more rest.
- Contact friends.
- Have someone to stay with you for a few hours or over night.
- Accept recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks as normal. They will decrease with time.
- Keep a normal schedule if possible.
- Eat balanced regular meals.
- Keep a reasonable level of activity.
- Keep occupied.
- Take physical exercise.
- Express your feelings.
- Talk to people who care about you.
- Find a good Counsellor if the feelings continue or become too intense.

How you can help others

- Listen carefully.
- Spend time with the traumatised person.
- Offer help, even if it has not been asked for.
- Reassure the person that they are safe.
- Help with practical tasks like cooking, cleaning, childcare.
- Give the person some private time.
- Don't take any feelings of anger personally.
- Don't say "your lucky it wasn't worse" instead say you're sorry and you want to understand and help.

Critical Incidents On Campus

- In an immediate life threatening crisis phone the emergency services on 111
- Campus Care staff will respond immediately to any critical incident on Campus both to manage the response needed and to support staff. (tel. 8888)
- Counsellors from the University's Counselling Service will respond to provide support to students and staff in the immediate aftermath of any serious event. (tel. 463 5310)
- Staff can also access free counselling from EAP Services Ltd. (tel. 472 5886)

If you have any further queries or would like to speak to a Counsellor.

Phone 463 – 5310

Email - counselling-service@vuw.ac.nz

Or call in to the Counselling Service

Mauri Ora, Level 1 Student Union Building, Kelburn Campus

VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF WELLINGTON

Te Whare Wananga o te Upoko o te Ika a Maui



Critical Incident Stress

Critical incident stress... is disruption to our state of harmony caused by sudden, traumatic events. Such stress can put strain on our resources and mental well-being.

Learning to recognise the normal reactions and emotions that occur following an abnormal event can help us to understand and feel more at ease with those feelings. This in turn can help us in adjusting to what happened.