

Reactions to Traumatic Events

Traumatic events – unexpected, overwhelmingly frightening and horrible in our experience, cause us to react in a variety of ways, whether or not we are aware of our reactions. The nature of these events and their suddenness make it unlikely that we will feel prepared for them or have an easy time in their aftermath. Examples of trauma may include a sexual assault or other violence, witness to a car crash or other severe bodily injury or death, a natural disaster such as a hurricane or earthquake, or sudden death of a loved one.

Our reactions to trauma may vary for each of us but we can attempt to be aware of common reactions and their courses, as well as steps we can take to minimize them and return to our “normal” lives as soon and comfortably as possible. Being aware of common reactions and responses to traumatic events may enable us to help others as well.

Physical Signs of Stress

- **Fatigue – tiredness**
- **Rapid heartbeat and breathing**
- **Insomnia**
- **Headaches**
- **Trembling**
- **Frequent colds**
- **Muscle aches and stiffness**
- **Cold hands and feet or excessive sweating**

Mental/Emotional signs of stress

- **Difficulty concentrating**
- **Mind racing or going blank**
- **Confusion**
- **Increased feelings of anxiety, worry, nervousness, anger, impatience, irritability**
- **Sadness, loss of a sense of humor**
- **Guilt and unrealistic feelings that we could have done something or more to prevent the trauma**
- **Flashbacks, preoccupation and nightmares of the event**

Behavioral signs of stress

- **Sleeping too much or too little**
- **Pacing**
- **Increased or decreased eating**
- **Nervous habits – nail biting, foot tapping**
- **Increased use of substances – alcohol, drugs**
- **Avoidance of work or spending time with friends**

Coping Strategies for Stress Reduction:

Lifestyle Strategies

- **Socialize with friends.** It can be helpful to talk about the event with a friend or loved one.
- **Plan a reasonable schedule for yourself including down times, social time, time for exercise.**
- **Take time alone for yourself when needed, but don't isolate.** Our connections to others remind us that we matter, test our assumptions and perspective and help us feel connected again.
- **Challenge your feelings of guilt by speaking with friends and loved ones.**
- **Plan regular self-care.** Eat on a healthy schedule, exercise and plan recreation times and activities, get plenty of sleep.
- **Develop priorities outside of work (visiting new places each week, hobbies, creative expression, see how many new things you can learn about the culture you are in).**
- **Keep a journal of your experience and learnings.**
- **Avoid making important decisions.** Judgment and perspective are shaken and can become distorted after a trauma.
- **Avoid alcohol and drug use.** Intoxication is short-lived and potentially dangerous. Substance abuse also impairs our emotional stability and predictability.
- **Set daily priorities and follow them (what is the most important thing for me to do now?).** Returning to our routines as we are able helps us feel more "normal" after a trauma.
- **Be Aware of and tend to your physiological needs**
 - Exercise regularly
 - Eat a balanced diet
 - Get adequate sleep
 - Practice deep breathing, meditation, and or visualization.
 - Stretch
 - Yoga
 - Practice relaxation exercises

Always be aware that counseling support is available at UHCS. You may call for an appointment at UHCS at 617-373-2772, choice, #1, or come to 135 Forsyth Building to be seen. Our hours are:

Monday, Wednesday, Friday 8:00AM to 5:00PM

Tuesday, Thursday 8:00AM to 8:00PM

Saturdays during the academic year 12:00noon to 4:00PM.

If you feel that you are at risk of harm to yourself or others, or know of someone else experiencing the same, please call Northeastern University Public Safety at 617-373-3333.

