

Coping with Critical Incident Stress

You may have experienced a traumatic event or a critical incident. The reactions you have to these abnormal events or incidents are normal and can overwhelm your natural ability to cope. Even though the event may be over, you may now be experiencing, or may experience later, some strong physical, cognitive, emotional, or behavioral 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. Critical incidents can also be exacerbated by lived experiences in which you have been the target of bias or discrimination. With understanding and the support of loved ones, the stress reactions can pass more quickly. Occasionally, the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be necessary. Needing assistance does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular event was just too powerful for you to manage alone. The staff at Counseling and Psychological Services is here to help.

Physical	Cognitive	Emotional	Behavioral
Chills	Confusion	Fear	Withdrawal
Nausea	Nightmares	Guilt	Antisocial Acts
Thirst	Uncertainty	Grief	Inability to Rest
Fatigue	Hypervigilance	Panic	Intensified Pacing
Fainting	Suspiciousness	Denial	Erratic Movements
Lightheadedness	Intrusive Images	Anxiety	Alcohol Consumption
Twitches	Blaming Others	Agitation	Drug Use
Vomiting	Poor Problem Solving	Irritability	Change in Social Contact
Dizziness	Poor Abstract Thinking	Depression	Change in Speech Patterns
Weakness	Poor Attention	Intense Anger	Change in Activity
Chest Pain	Poor Decision Making	Apprehension	Hyperalert to Environment
Headaches	Poor Concentration	Shock	Change in Communications
Elevated Blood Pressure	Poor Memory	Feeling Overwhelmed	Emotional Outbursts
Rapid Heart Rate	Disorientation of Time Place, Person, or Situation	Loss of Emotional Control	Loss or Increase of Appetite
Muscle Tremors	Difficulty Identifying Objects or People	Heightened Emotional Responses	Changes in Sexual Desire or Functioning
Teeth Grinding	Heightened or Lowered Alertness	Numbing	Insomnia and then Hypersomnia
Visual Difficulties	Increased or Decreased Awareness of Surroundings	Helplessness	Strong Startle Responses
Profuse Sweating	Homicidal or Suicidal Thoughts	Hopelessness	Avoidance
Difficulty Breathing	Flashbacks		Aggressiveness
Headaches	Amnesia for Incident		Increased Smoking
Exhaustion	Self-Blame		Unusual Behaviors
Digestive Problems	Slowed Learning Speed		Self-Injury
Reduced Coordination	Decreased Self-Awareness		
Muscle Aches	Distorted Thinking		

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- Remember that you are having normal reactions to an abnormal situation – don't label yourself crazy.
- Be gentle and patient with yourself.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten.
- Do things that feel good to you.
- Focus on the incident as a moment in time, not something that defines who you are.
- Keep your life as normal as possible.
- Structure your time – keep busy.
- Make as many small, daily decisions as possible, which will give you a feeling of control over your life (e.g., if someone asks you what you want to eat – answer them even if you're not sure).
- Do not make any big life changes.
- Spend time with others.
- Seek out spiritual or cultural support.
- Talk to people – talking is the most healing medicine.
- Realize those around you are under stress.
- Help others as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they're doing.
- Be aware of numbing the pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol; you don't need to complicate this with a substance abuse problem.
- Avoid hazardous activities.
- Avoid sugar and caffeine.
- Drink plenty of water or other non-caffeinated, low-sugar liquids.
- Supplement your diet with vitamin C, vitamin B2, vitamin B6, calcium, and magnesium.
- Eat healthy foods (e.g., fruits, vegetables, beans, high fiber, and high protein).
- Avoid media coverage of the event, as it may exacerbate existing symptoms.
- Within the first 24-48 hours, periods of strenuous physical exercise alternated with relaxation will alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Keep a journal.
- Listen to soothing music.
- Surround yourself with pleasant smells such as chamomile, lavender, and eucalyptus.
- Use relaxation strategies such as meditation or deep breathing.
- Get a massage.



Counseling and Psychological Services
Duke University
(919) 660-1000