

You've Just Been Through A Difficult Event



You have been given this handout because something quite difficult has recently occurred where you work, or associated with your work in some way. Perhaps it was a serious accident, a robbery, an act of violence, or some other incident that has left people directly or indirectly involved feeling distraught, or perhaps devastated. The purpose of this handout is to help you understand the reactions you may be experiencing to this incident and give you some suggestions on how you can help yourself to begin feeling better.

What are the reactions?

Even though everyone reacts differently here are some of the more common ways people who have witnessed a very difficult incident will respond:

Physical reactions

Headaches, loss of appetite, insomnia, persistent heart palpitations, fatigue, gastrointestinal problems.

Emotional reactions

Fear, anxiety, distress, anger, irritability, sadness, mistrust, guilt.

Behavioural reactions

Tearfulness, vigilance, withdrawal or isolation, increased tendency to blame or criticize people close to you, increased consumption of alcohol or medication.

Mental reactions

Loss of concentration, forgetfulness, indecisiveness, vivid memories about the event.

Are these reactions "normal"?

Absolutely. These are the reactions of a normal human being to an abnormal situation. Research has shown that when you acknowledge these stress reactions and take care of them, they usually disappear within a few weeks.

Do these reactions always occur right after the event?

Not always. Some individuals don't experience these reactions until later, but this isn't the case for most people. Whether these reactions occur right away or later, they are generally experienced by almost everyone who goes through an abnormally stressful situation.

Is there any way to avoid these types of reactions?

You can never avoid them completely. Even individuals who are well-informed and well-prepared have acute stress reactions in such situations. Police officers, ambulance technicians, first-aid workers, and fire fighters may have strong stress reactions to emergency situations, despite their training and experience. Remember that these are normal reactions.

What can you do?

1. **Pay more attention to your feelings and reactions than to the event itself.**
2. **Don't judge or blame yourself.** Don't criticize yourself for having these reactions. Be patient with yourself. Think about how you'd talk to a friend in this situation, and then treat yourself the same way.
3. **Try to reduce other sources of stress in your life for a while.**

4. **Take the time to talk about your physical and emotional reactions to someone close to you** (friend, spouse, relative). You can also turn to coworkers. They're probably feeling the same way, since they experienced the same event.
5. Within twenty-four hours following the event, **get some physical exercise**, no matter how light it is.
6. **Find something that will help you forget the event for a while.** Some people find it helpful to keep busy (leisure activities, hobbies, manual activities, warm baths, physical exercise, etc.), while others find it helpful to relax or go out with friends.
7. **Take time to rest.**
8. If you find you're getting mental images of the event or other fears, **remind yourself that you're safe now** and that you no longer have to be on "red alert." Then direct your attention to something else.
9. Many people will be curious and ask you questions about the event. If you don't feel like answering, **it's perfectly appropriate to explain politely that you prefer not to talk about it.** You can say, "I understand that you'd like to know more about what happened, but I'd rather not talk about it. I hope you'll understand."

What should you do if your stress reactions don't diminish from week to week?

It's better not to keep the problem all to yourself. People close to you don't always know how to help, despite their best intentions. If these reactions have not diminished from week to week, don't hesitate to call your organization's Assistance Program to meet a professional.

What have you gained from your experience?

Once things have calmed down, it can be useful to ask yourself, "What have I gained from this experience?" After a difficult event, most people learn something about themselves or others, or about what matters most to them. Take some quiet time to think about this. You may make some interesting discoveries.

Need more information or assistance? For more information, to book a counselling session, or to access any of your Assistance Program services our Client Services Representatives are ready to speak with you 24 hours a day, seven days a week, in English or French. All calls are completely confidential.

1.800.663.1142 | **1.866.398.9505** (Numéro sans frais – en français)

1.888.384.1152 (TTY) | **604.689.1717** (International Call Collect)

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