
Coping With A Traumatic Incident

Information Guide

Farnham Fire Department



Response to a Traumatic Incident

Following a stress event, you may experience powerful physical, emotional or mental reactions. Not all people react in the same way or with the same intensity. Often the intensity of the reaction seems to have little relationship to the severity of the event that has caused the stress. You may have a profoundly powerful reaction to an event that seems much less serious to others. How you put the traumatic event into perspective is important. In an attempt to make sense of what happened. It is important that you do not blame yourself. It is also important to understand that strong emotional reactions are common after a traumatic event. These feelings may be alarming, but they can be managed and will not last.

Critical incident stress is nothing more than NORMAL reaction for NORMAL people in ABNORMAL situations.

Tips for Recovery

Remain in touch with your friends and loved ones.

There is sometimes a tendency for people to pull away from interactions with others. Often friends and loved ones do not know what to say and, therefore, they say nothing or say something to which you have a negative reaction. It may seem as though your friends have abandoned you. You can help by telling friends what you need from them: i.e., "I feel really uncomfortable with physical contact right now." or "I'd appreciate it if you would call me every day and ask how I'm doing." Let your family and friends in. Don't isolate yourself.

Return to your regular routine as soon as possible.

When something terrifying or incomprehensible happens, your immediate perception may be that everything is dangerous or out of control, and that you are not safe. Although these feelings are understandable, they are almost always false, having been distorted by the overwhelming nature of the event that took place. Try to maintain at least part of the event that took place. Try to maintain at least part of your normal routine. It will help you deal with feelings of being out of control. By going to work, shopping, driving, exercising, eating, being with family ect., a more healthy and accurate perception of life begins to develop. You realize that not all the world is dangerous and not everyone is out to harm you. With each little success, you slowly regain emotional equilibrium or stability. Keep in mind that this is not a time to alter life goals or make major decisions or changes. Your usual routine will help your life return to normal.

Talk about your reactions to the incident.

Silence is not a sign of strength. The more you talk about your reactions, the easier it will be to put the incident into perspective and behind you. Your reactions are common responses to horrific events. Frequent repetition of your story to others is common.

Reduce your intake of alcohol, drugs, caffeine, nicotine, and processed carbohydrates and sugars.

These substances affect body chemistry. In combination, or in excess, they can increase blood pressure, as well as cholesterol and triglyceride levels. Be mindful of how these substances can increase insomnia, irritability, fatigue, headaches and other physical symptoms.

Get information about the incident.

Uncertainty can prolong distress. Contact the police, fire department, or other agencies that can give you the information you need about the event. This can help you regain your sense of control.

Short-term physical responses to trauma may include:

- Nausea
- Shortness of breath
- Lack of energy
- Hyperventilation
- Change in eating or sleeping patterns
- Rapid pulse

Mental and emotional responses may include:

- Reliving the event or flashbacks
- Avoidance of people/places that remind you of the event
- Nightmares/night terrors
- Intrusive thoughts
- Difficulty sleeping
- Substance abuse
- Feelings of guilt or grief
- Family or marital problems
- Depression
- Mood swings (sudden fear, irritability, anger, crying)
- Numbing and withdrawal
- Decline in job performance
- Poor concentration
- Memory loss / confusion

- Embarrassment
- Difficulty showing emotion
- Inability to recall important aspects of the event
- Exaggerated startle response
- Disinterest in previously valued activities
- Sexual dysfunction
- Overwhelming feelings
- Suicidal thoughts

Stress Management

- Put safety first
- Eat nutritionally
- Get 8 hours of sleep daily
- Exercise 3 to 5 times per week
- Spend quality time with family or friends
- Avoid caffeine, sugar, and alcohol
- Drink more water than usual
- Avoid relying on chemical aids
- Practice breathing slowly
- Take time to relax every day
- Get support from others
- Exercise your sense of humor
- Increase positive thoughts
- Break large tasks into smaller increments
- Clearly establish your priorities