

# Common Reactions Following a Traumatic Event

## I. Factors Determining Severity of Reactions

- A. Suddenness of event.
- B. Duration.
- C. Timing.
- D. Ability to understand in retrospect.
- E. Extent of carnage or injury.
- F. Physical proximity and sensory involvement.
- G. Severity of event.
- H. Involvement with the victim.
- I. Previous life stressors.

## II. Common Reactions

### A. On Scene and First Day

1. Fear/terror/panic.
2. Shock, disbelief, denial.
3. Confusion and disorganization.
4. Survivor's guilt: Gladness at being alive, but subsequent guilt.
5. Recoil.
6. Catatonic.
7. Hyperactivity.
8. Anger.
9. Frustration at inability to do more.
10. Time expansion (everything in slow motion).
11. Tunnel vision.
12. Physical reactions: shaking, chest pains, sweating, nausea, heart rate increases.
13. "Honeymoon phase": may be filled with excitement and adrenalin.

### B. First Few Days

1. Avoiding the media.
2. Mood swings; range of emotions.
3. Guilt about role during event.
4. Seeking information.
5. Anger at the system and the victims.
6. Sadness and grief about the victims and family members.
7. Wondering about sanity: "Am I crazy?"
8. Other tragedies triggered.
9. Fear; "This could happen to me."
10. Wanting to talk, talk, talk.
11. Feeling very alone; i.e., "No one understands."

12. Trouble sleeping.
13. Nightmares and recurrent dreams.
14. Intrusive recollections.

#### C. First Month

1. Increased vigilance and startle response.
2. Avoidance of associated events.
3. Action directed at preventing event from happening.
4. Impatient with family and friends.
5. Inability to concentrate.
6. Difficulty sleeping.

#### D. Recovery

1. A new confidence in yourself.
2. Feeling "sadder but wiser" about self, others, and life.
3. Greater appreciation for family, friends, life
4. Begin taking new action based on traumatic experience:
  - a) helping others
  - b) practical action
  - c) life changes

### **III. When Professional Help Might Be Needed**

- A. This is a very individual decision that one needs to make based on the severity of the event, the stability of one's life before the event, and one's present support system.
- B. If the following symptoms occur persistently for at least one month after the event, professional evaluation may be indicated:
  1. The traumatic event is persistently re-experienced.
    - a) Recurrent dreams.
    - b) Feelings that event is recurring.
    - c) Intrusive recollections.
  2. A persistent avoidance of events associated with the traumatic event.
  3. A general sense of "numbing" and of feeling estranged from others.
  4. Persistent symptoms of increased arousal, such as difficulty sleeping, increased vigilance, and continuing to be startled easily.