

IDENTIFYING YOUR MOST COMMON SYMPTOMS OF DISTRESS

Most people know when they are experiencing excessive levels of stress arousal. The manner in which we are alerted to such a condition of distress may be through the development of symptoms of excessive stress. Listed below are numerous potentially stress-related symptoms that people experience. Read through the list and check your most common symptoms of distress putting a check in the column indicating how often you experience each.

"When I am under a great deal of stress, I experience:"			
	Seldom	Sometimes	Often
1. Headaches			
2. Irregular heart beat			
3. Muscle spasms			
4. Gastrointestinal problems			
5. Vertigo			
6. High blood pressure			
7. Low blood pressure			
8. Fatigue			
9. Difficulty concentrating			
10. Feeling overwhelmed			
11. Anger, irritability			
12. Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep			
13. Sadness/depression			
14. Increased appetite			
15. Decreased appetite			
16. Rashes or hives			
17. Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness			
18. Apathy			
19. Increased use of alcohol and/or tobacco			
20. Cynicism, negativism			

STRESS SYMPTOMS

Check any symptoms you have noticed in yourself on the "Stress Symptoms" list.

The presence of any symptom indicates that you are dealing with some stress. If half or more of the symptoms are checked in any of the categories, your stress level is much too high.

Different people experience stress in different ways. Some people experience stress physically (muscle tension, headache, backache), while others react to stress mentally or emotionally (insomnia, worry, irritability, difficulty relating to friends and family).

CHECKLIST

EMOTION

anxiety
frustration
the "blues"
mood swings
bad temper
nightmares
crying spells
irritability
"no one cares"
depression
nervous laugh
worrying easily
discouraged
little joy

MENTAL

forgetfulness
dull senses
poor concentration
low productivity
negative attitude
confusion
lethargy
whirling mind
no new ideas
boredom
spacing out
negative self-task

RELATIONAL

isolation
intolerance
resentment
loneliness
lashing out
hiding
clamming up
lowered sex drive
nagging
distrust
fewer contacts with friends
lack of intimacy
using people

SPIRITUAL

emptiness
loss of meaning
doubt
unforgiving
martyrdom
looking for magic
loss of direction
cynicism
apathy
needing to "prove" self

PHYSICAL

appetite change
headaches
tension
fatigue
insomnia
weight change
colds
pounding heart
muscle aches
teeth grinding
rash
restlessness
foot-tapping
finger-drumming
increase alcohol, drug,
tobacco use
accident prone
digestive upset

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Meriter Resources Available: Employee Assistance Program – 267-6293
(Robert Seidner – Critical Incident Response
Team Coordinator)
Pastoral Services – 267-6480
Patient and Family Services – 267-6027

SELF-HELP GUIDE TO COPING WITH A CRITICAL INCIDENT

The traumatic event that you recently experienced is known as a "critical incident." As a result of what you have just gone through, you may feel anything from a sense of irritation and annoyance to extreme difficulty carrying on with your normal life in the hours, days and even months ahead. You might have noticed that it was (or still is) hard to believe this event has actually happened; you may feel lost, confused, numb and unable to concentrate. You may also feel drained of your energy. One important way that you can help yourself to heal from this event is to try to become aware of the way in which your body and mind are responding to this situation. Being aware of your own stress reactions can help to remind you when to take extra care of yourself and when to ask for help. Listed below are some of the predictable reactions that commonly occur in people both during and after a critical incident. All of these reactions are completely normal, and they do not occur in any particular order. Although most people experience some of these reactions, it is unlikely that anyone would experience all of them.

Normal Reactions to a Critical Incident

Physical

Nausea
Upset stomach
Tremors/shaking (lips, hands)
Feeling uncoordinated
Profuse sweating
Chills
Diarrhea
Dizziness
Chest pain (should be checked at a hospital)
Rapid heart beat
Rapid breathing
Headaches
Muscle aches
Sleep disturbance

Thinking

Slowed thinking
Difficulty making decisions
Difficulty in problem-solving
Confusion
Disorientation (especially to place and time)
Difficulty calculating
Difficulty concentrating
Memory problems
Difficulty naming common objects
Seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling the event over and over
Distressing dreams
Poor attention span
Disbelief--feels like a bad dream
Minimizations/denial
Not wanting to talk about the event
Avoiding situations that are reminders of the incident

Emotional

Anxiety
Fear
Guilt
Grief
Shame
Depression
Sadness
Feeling lost
Feeling abandoned
Feeling isolated
Wanting to hide
Wanting to limit contact with others
Worry about re-occurrence
Anger
Irritability
Feeling numb
Startled
Shocked/in a daze

Remember that everyone reacts differently to stress. Try to avoid comparing yourself to other people as you work your way through recovery from this incident. Instead, try thinking of your own reaction to this event as a fingerprint; it is uniquely yours and is not necessarily better or worse than the way someone else might react. Give yourself permission to feel and to heal from this experience in your own way!

If the reactions are severe, or they last longer than six weeks, you may need professional assistance.

HELPING YOURSELF AFTER A CRITICAL INCIDENT

These proven self-help strategies may help to reduce the effects of the stress reactions to a critical incident.

FOR YOURSELF

Try to rest a bit more.

Contact friends.

Ask someone to stay with you for at least a few hours or for a day or more.

Keep your schedule as normal as possible.

Try to decrease intake of caffeine, white sugar, and white flour, these substances exaggerate stress response.

Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even when you don't feel like it).

Try to keep a reasonable level of activity.

Fight against boredom.

Physical activity is essential.

Re-establish your normal routine.

Resist the urge to drink or medicate away the aftershocks of the incident.

Express your feelings as they arise.

Talk to people who love you.

Don't try to fight recurring thoughts dreams or flashbacks; they are normal and they will decrease over time and become less painful.

Find a good counselor if the feelings become prolonged or too intense.

If the reactions are severe, or they last longer than six weeks, you may need professional assistance.

FOR FAMILY MEMBERS AND FRIENDS

Recognize and accept that there will be some disruption in your normal routine.

Do not go about daily activities as if nothing has happened.

Volunteer your help and availability to listen.

Spend time with the person who experienced the critical incident.

Allow them to freely, safely express their feelings.

Don't tell them that they are "lucky it wasn't worse" - people who have been through a critical incident are not consoled by these statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry this event has occurred and you want to understand and help them by being there for them.

Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.

Do not allow them to berate or hurt you.

Listen carefully, often and non-judgmentally.

Be aware of children's responses and include children in the information and healing process.

Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, minding children, transportation, lending money.

Consider getting some extra help for daily or weekly responsibilities.

You may also experience some of the symptoms associated with critical incident stress. While this is normal and natural, it may also be a signal to consider getting some outside help for you.

Contact and use resources (e.g., employee assistance programs, crisis lines, counselors, or your own support system (friends, relatives, clergy, etc.).