

When these or other symptoms persist, increase in number or degree of severity to the point of interfering with personal functioning and/or are subjectively distressing, professional counseling or joining a support group may be helpful. If you are not sure whether you would benefit from additional assistance, it is better to consult a mental health professional than to do nothing or to guess.

Counseling can help you address and understand your feelings, help you identify normal reactions to crisis situations, and help you look at how your life and relationships have been impacted. It can also help you learn stress management techniques and sharpen your coping skills.

Support groups can help you feel less isolated when group members share similar experiences. Group members can often support and understand each other in special ways because of their common experiences. They share information about recovery and special ways of coping.

Finding support in general can help you feel like a survivor rather than like a victim.

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### **Counseling and Psychological Services**

*The CAPS is open from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm weekdays. Appointments may be made by coming to the Counseling and Psychological Services and completing a "Request for Counseling Form."*

*For after-hour emergencies, contact the Helene Fuld Crisis Unit at (609) 396-HELP, Campus Police at 911, and/or a Residence Education staff member.*

## *Helping Family Members and Friends*

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Sometimes it is difficult to know what to do or say to somebody who has just survived a traumatic event. Supporting a person following such an event can be stressful for the helper. In general, it is important to be available to the survivor and to let the person know that you care. Spending time with the traumatized person is also a basic, but important way to help.

Offer your assistance and a listening ear if they have not asked for help. Talking can be a healing medicine. Try to be patient if the person tells the same story over and over again; this is normal and can also be healing.

*Here are some more suggestions for helping:*

- Listen carefully.
- Help them with everyday tasks like getting class notes, cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, helping with the children
- Give them some private time.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't minimize the loss.
- Avoid giving clichés or easy answers.
- Don't tell them that they are "lucky" (that it could be worse, that they have another daughter, etc.); traumatized people do not feel consoled by these types of statements.
- Be patient.
- Avoid judgmental statements.
- Avoid telling them how they feel.
- Help them find and utilize outside resources (books, support groups, professionals, government aid, workshops, other friends).

*In our quest to help the survivors, we must not forget that we cannot take care of others if we are not taking care of ourselves. You may need the opportunity to express your emotions and to turn to other friends or family members for support.*



## **Counseling and Psychological Services**

# Surviving Trauma

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# What to Expect After a Traumatic Event or Disaster

Disasters or traumatic events can affect all of us. They are dramatic and intense experiences that can cause major interruptions in the natural flow of life. Such events may occur to individuals or to groups of people (e.g., natural disasters or acts of terrorism). Knowing feelings and reactions that may occur following such events can assist you in putting your feelings in perspective and can help you make the transition from victim to survivor.

The emotional effects of these events may show up immediately or may appear weeks, even months later. The signs and symptoms of emotional aftershock may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months and occasionally longer. Sometimes, the traumatic event is so painful that assistance from a counselor may be necessary. This does not imply a serious psychological problem or weakness but rather, that the particular event was just too powerful for you to manage alone.

## Common Reactions to Stressful or Traumatic Situations

It is very common and quite normal to have reactions after experiencing a horrible event. Some reactions are emotional, some are physical and some are cognitive

- Shock
- Hopelessness
- Anger
- Numbness
- Self-pity
- Inability to cope
- Disbelief
- Grief
- Preoccupation
- Sadness
- Panic
- Guilt
- Tearfulness
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Stunned
- Irritability
- Confusion
- Self-blame
- Fatigue
- Fear
- Nightmares
- Loneliness
- Remorse
- Flashbacks of event
- Isolation
- Relationship problems
- Memory problems
- Difficulty concentrating
- Intrusive thoughts or images
- Desire to avoid situations

## Common Physical Reactions

Some people tend to express their reactions through physical symptoms including:

- Headaches
- Aches and pains
- Overeating
- Loss of appetite
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Sleep disturbances
- Vomiting
- Decreased performance levels
- Increased ailments over the next 6-18 months (e.g. colds, infections, hypertension...)

## Trauma and a Sense of Loss

People traumatized by events or disasters often experience a pervasive sense of loss:

- Loss of feeling safe
- Loss of friends
- Loss of hope
- Loss of personal power
- Loss of identity/future
- Loss of trust in others
- Loss of home/belongings

Grief is a normal and natural response to loss and anyone can experience grief and loss. Individual reactions to grief and loss can vary widely, and the same person may experience different reactions to a sense of loss over time.

## Recovering from Trauma, Loss and Disasters

Experiencing and accepting the natural responses described above represents an important part of the recovery process. Try to remember: *You are having a normal reaction to an abnormal event!* Here are some additional tips for dealing with your reactions:

- Talk openly about your feelings and symptoms
- Pay attention to a healthy diet
- Engage in moderate physical activity
- Maintain contact with friends and supports
- Share memories
- Tell stories
- Rehearse safety measures to be taken in the future
- Try deep breathing and other relaxation techniques
- Refrain from numbing the pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible
- Keep a journal
- Do things that feel good to you
- Play with a pet or young child
- Don't make any big life changes

**Confidentiality is strictly maintained in accordance with all applicable laws and professional ethical codes.**