



Helping People Be Better at Work

## COMMON SIGNS AND SIGNALS OF A STRESS REACTION

### **PHYSICAL SIGNS**

Fatigue	Chills
Nausea (upset stomach)	Dizziness
Twitches	Grinding your teeth
Muscle tremors (lips, hands)	Fainting
Thirst	Profuse sweating
Vomiting	Rapid heart rate
Elevated blood pressure	Feeling uncoordinated
Headaches	Muscle aches

**If you have chest pain, difficulty breathing or shock symptoms, seek medical attention**

### **COGNITIVE SIGNS**

Blaming someone	Nightmares
Confusion	Higher or lower alertness
Poor attention span	Loss of time, place, people orientation
Disturbed thinking	Difficulty naming common objects
Memory problems	Intrusive images (flashbacks)
Difficulty making decisions	Difficulty problem solving
Disorientation	Difficulty calculating

### **EMOTIONAL SIGNS**

Anxiety	Loss of emotional control
Guilt	Apprehension
Grief (sadness)	Intense anger
Denial	Feeling overwhelmed
Fear	Inappropriate emotional responses
Uncertainty	Irritability
Depression	Agitation
Feeling abandoned	Worry about others
Wanting to limit contact with others	Wanting to hide
Feeling numb	Startled/shocked

### **BEHAVIORAL SIGNS**

Change in activity	Change in speech pattern
Angry outbursts	Pacing
Loss or increase in appetite	Alcohol consumption
Inability to rest	Antisocial acts
Erratic movements	Nonspecific body complaints
Hyper alert	Change in sexual function
Crying spells	Suspiciousness

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## **When Terrible Things Happen**

*What You May Experience*

### **Intrusive Reactions**

- Distressing thoughts or images of the event while awake or dreaming
- Upsetting emotional or physical reactions to reminders of the experience
- Feeling like the experience is happening all over again (flashback)

### **Avoidance and withdrawal reactions**

- Avoid talking, thinking, and having feelings about the traumatic event
- Avoid reminders of the event (places and people connected to what happened)
- Restricted emotions: feeling numb
- Feelings of detachment and estrangement from others; social withdrawal
- Loss of interest in usually pleasurable activities

### **Physical arousal reactions**

- Constantly being “on the lookout” for danger, startling easily, or being jumpy
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep, problems concentrating or paying attention

### **Trauma and Loss reminders**

- Places, people, sights, sounds, smells, and feelings that remind you of the disaster
- Can bring on distressing mental images, thoughts, and emotional/physical reactions
- Common examples include: sudden loud noises, the smell of fire, sirens or ambulances, locations where you have experienced the disaster, seeing people with disabilities, funerals, anniversaries of the disaster, and television/radio news about the disaster

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### **What Helps**

- Talking to another person for support
- Engaging in positive distracting activities (sports, hobbies, reading)
- Getting adequate rest and eating healthy meals
- Trying to maintain a normal schedule
- Scheduling pleasant activities
- Taking breaks
- Spending time with others
- Using relaxation methods (breathing exercises, meditation, calming self talk)
- Participating in a support group
- Exercising in moderation
- Keeping a journal
- Seeking counseling

### **What Doesn't Help**

- Using alcohol or drugs to cope
- Withdrawing from family or friends
- Overeating or failing to eat
- Withdrawing from pleasant activities
- Working too much
- Anger or violence
- Doing risky things
- Blaming others
- Extreme avoidance of thinking or talking about the event
- Not taking care of yourself
- Excessive TV or computer games

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### **THINGS YOU CAN DO TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF**

- ◆ Keep busy.
- ◆ Talk to people.
- ◆ Eat well-balanced and regular meals.
- ◆ Avoid numbing the pain with alcohol or drugs.
- ◆ Reach out – people do care.
- ◆ Maintain your normal schedule.
- ◆ Help your co-workers by sharing your feelings.
- ◆ Don't make big life changes.
- ◆ Give yourself permission to feel rotten.
- ◆ Make as many daily decisions as possible to maintain control over your life.
- ◆ You're NORMAL and having NORMAL reactions – Don't think you're crazy.
- ◆ Get plenty of rest.
- ◆ Dreams, thoughts and flashbacks are normal – they'll decrease over time.
- ◆ Spend time with others.
- ◆ Alternate exercise and relaxation.
- ◆ Attend a debriefing.

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## **HOW TO HELP THOSE YOU CARE ABOUT**

- Encourage the survivor to talk to you about how he or she is feeling.
- Don't assume that men handle this kind of trauma better than women.
- Tell the survivor how you feel, that you are sorry that they have been hurt.
- Remind the survivor that his or her confusing emotions are normal.
- Do not attempt to reassure the survivor that everything will be all right. Everything is not all right.
- Do not attempt to impose your explanation on why this event has occurred.
- Do not tell the survivor that you know how she or he feels. You don't. Often such attempts are really aimed at relieving your own anxiety about how you feel about what has happened to the survivor.
- Be willing to say nothing. Just being there may be enough.
- Tell your friends and family how you are feeling. Even if you are not a direct survivor of the trauma. Remember that people who care about survivors often become co-survivors.
- Report to friends or family any unusual physical symptoms that might be interfering with your daily routine.
- Don't be afraid to encourage a survivor to ask for help, including counseling, if necessary. And don't be afraid to ask for help our self, even if you are not directly involved.
- Go to any court hearings, community meetings, and school meetings – any events that directly relate to the trauma. Offer to go for support.
- Try not to project your own feelings on those around you. Each survivor and co-survivor experiences trauma and its consequences differently. Be understanding of the pace at which each person copes and heals.
- Don't be afraid to ask how someone is doing. Do not ask for details of the trauma. If the survivor wants to talk, listen. The best thing to do is to let the survivor know that you are there and that you care. It is not necessary to try to make things better.
- Don't make a schedule by which a person "should" recover.

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## **ABOUT GRIEF**

Grief is the reaction people have to any loss in their lives. It includes a wide range of responses which vary with each person, the type of loss and its meaning to them, and the person's particular circumstances and experiences. The death of a friend or loved one is a major loss but grief can be felt about many losses.

Examples include:

- the ending of a relationship
- moving or migrating
- losing a job, health, a pet, a role in life
- giving up something that mattered a lot
- losing a dream

### **Secondary losses**

One loss can cause other secondary losses that may only become clear as time passes and may include:

- loss of income
- changed roles in the family or workplace
- loss of the family home
- loss of a planned future

A loss, or something associated with the loss, may cause recurrent or ongoing grief. Many things can be mixed up in people's experience of loss and change and add to a sense of confusion. There can be positive aspects or feelings as well as pain and difficulty. Sometimes even desired changes, such as a promotion, can also result in losses.

### **Grieving**

When people grieve they are coming to terms with what has changed in their lives. At the same time, they are beginning to find new ways of going about their lives to cope with the gaps that loss has created. This takes varying periods of time. The length of time is affected by things such as the significance of the loss and what other things happen to the person. It is not unusual for grief to be felt over an extended period of time, even up to several years.

### **The body's response**

Although each person will grieve in his or her own way, there is a general pattern. Following a loss, the person first may be stunned or distressed and react with shock. The person may have physical reactions such as sleeplessness, difficulty sitting still or concentrating, loss of appetite, stomach upset, or even chest pains (which should be checked by a doctor). Often people feel numb or as though they are on "automatic pilot". They may do normal activities but not feel connected to the real world.

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### **Thoughts and feelings**

People experience a whole range of thoughts and feelings that are often complex and even quite opposite to one another. For example, relief, guilt, laughter, anguish, anger often coexist to leave the person feeling very confused. This storm of emotion comes and goes over time and varies between individuals. Often strong feelings and complex thoughts are evoked as people are confronted with reminders of what they have lost. Loss of self esteem and confidence are common.

### **Initially**

In the beginning, most people have a sense of disbelief which they usually give up over time. Having a funeral or ritual sometimes plays a part in how this happens. The fact that people often cannot believe the loss has really happened can be useful in protecting them from being overwhelmed.

### **Three to four months after the death**

This may be a particularly low time. Society's expectations are that bereaved people should be over their grief by this time and should be back to normal. But this is when the reality of the death is sinking in. The chemicals that support the body after a severe stress are starting to wear off, and the support of friends is dropping away. This means bereaved people are often going through a very painful time when there is little support.

### **Coping**

Gradually most people begin to face the gaps in their daily lives and struggle to cope with the differences. They start to create new lives for themselves often while the old lives and the people who were such a significant part of those lives are mourned. Usually, this journey takes a lot of effort, emotion and energy, but the difficulty may not always be apparent to others. Sometimes people who are mourning do not look after themselves and they may have little energy to reach out for help.

### **Later**

The confusion and pain should diminish over time. Most people start to recognize they are having more frequent and longer periods when they feel more energy and hope. They often recognize they have successfully survived a difficult time in their lives and feel stronger. They may notice their memories are not as painful, although this pain may never go away altogether. The length of time it takes to make this adjustment varies a lot, beginning in the early months and perhaps lasting up to several years.

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## **GRIEF: What's "Normal"?**

It surprises many people to hear that grief is a normal and healing process. Grief can occur with any loss or setback in life, not just death. While the grief process is individual and varies some, typically there are five general stages of grief. The first stage is **denial**. We are in denial when we find it hard to accept that a loss has taken place in our lives. **Anger** is the second stage. This may have to do with rage we feel being out of control of our own lives. The third stage is **bargaining**. We offer deals with life to try to get our life back to the familiar. **Depression** is the fourth stage. We feel sad and sometimes hopeless over what has occurred. The last stage is **acceptance**. In this stage, we accept the new reality and find some way of moving on with our lives. The process is rarely nice and neat. We may roller coaster from feeling to feeling before acceptance finally comes. Or sometimes people get stuck in one stage and need help moving in the process. Counseling can be helpful in embracing the grief as a normal and healing process.

Most normal grieving after a death is completed in three months to a year. Grief responses to death may seem unusual or even distressing to others. Yet, in normal grief, it is not unusual to:

- Sense the presence of the one who died,
- Experience loss of sleep or appetite,
- Behave in impulsive, distressing ways (destroying certain property),
- Have thoughts and fears of your own death,
- Have thoughts of suicide,
- Be intensely angry at the one who died,
- Search for the deceased,
- Experience unexpected and uncontrollable waves of sadness,
- Experience an "anniversary reaction" on the anniversary of the loss.

The Employee Assistance Program offers confidential counseling resources to help with these reactions.

Unhealthy grief reactions may include things like:

- Excessive occurrence of any of the reactions listed above,
- Delayed or prolonged occurrence of any of the reactions listed above,
- Extended interruption of everyday activities,
- Evidence of a clear and workable plan to harm self or others.

The Employee Assistance Program offers confidential counseling resources to help with these reactions. The EAP also works with family members concerned about loved ones stuck in unhealthy grief.

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