

## COMMON RESPONSES TO DISTRESSING EVENTS

Although distressing events affect people differently, there are some common reactions that you may experience. These reactions may begin immediately, or you may feel fine for a couple of days or even weeks then suddenly be hit with a reaction. The important thing to remember is that these reactions are quite normal; although you may feel some distress, you're probably experiencing a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

Some common responses are:

### PHYSICAL REACTIONS:

- Sleep difficulties/nightmares
- Fatigue
- Hyperactivity or "nervous energy"
- Appetite changes
- Headaches
- Pain in neck, back, or other areas
- Heart palpitations or chest pain

### EMOTIONAL REACTIONS:

- Flashbacks or "reliving" the event
- Excessive jumpiness or tendency to be startled
- Irritability, anger
- Crying, disbelief
- Feelings of sadness, anxiety, helplessness

### EFFECTS ON PRODUCTIVITY:

- Decreased concentration or focus
- Increased incidence of errors
- Lapses of memory
- Withdrawing
- Tendency to overwork

Usually, the reactions to distress will lessen with time. If you are concerned about your reactions, then note their:

**Duration.** Normally, reactions will become less intense and disappear within a few weeks.

**Intensity.** If the reaction interferes with your ability to carry on your life normally, you may wish to seek help. If you are

concerned that your response is too intense, or is lasting too long, please take advantage of counselling. The phone number for Counselling and Student Development at BCIT is 604-432-8608. Whether you choose to make use of counselling or not, the following suggestions may help you during the distressing time:

### COPING SUGGESTIONS:

- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible, but don't overdo it. Cut out unnecessary "busyness" and don't take on new projects.
- Acknowledge that you'll be operating below normal level for a while.
- Structure your time even more carefully than usual. It's normal to forget things when you're under stress. Keep lists, and double-check any important work.
- Maintain control where you can. Make small decisions, even if you feel that it's unimportant or you don't care. It's important to maintain control in some areas of your life.
- Spend time with people you trust, even though it may be difficult at first. It's easy to withdraw when you're distressed, but now is the time to be in the company of others.
- Give yourself time. You may feel better for a while, then go up and down for a while. This is normal. Allow plenty of time for feeling better.
- Talk with others about your feelings and reactions (e.g., friends, family, classmates, counsellors)
- Help your peers by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing
- Take breaks, relax when you need to
- Take care of yourself (e.g., eat regularly, sleep, exercise)

Based on the Flagstaff Child and Family Counseling Center and the American Counseling Association ([www.counseling.org/tragedy/responses.html](http://www.counseling.org/tragedy/responses.html))

## HELPING OTHERS WITH DISTRESSING EVENTS

When someone you care about, work with, or live with experiences a distressing or upsetting event, it can be difficult to know what to do.

### SUGGESTIONS FOR HELPING OTHERS:

- Reach out and be available to support others who may be affected
- Let others talk openly about their feelings
- Don't offer false cheer
- Encourage them to look after their health
- Include them in your activities
- Be patient - there is no formula for "getting back to normal" and the person may not "be the same" for a while
- Don't minimize the impact of the event
- Don't compare others' experiences with your own, present or past (e.g., "Yeah, I know what it is like ...")
- Respect the other person's perspective. People may have different understandings and reactions to various events
- Be aware that the person may get unexpectedly upset at times
- Avoid speculating or commenting about what happened
- Let your friend speak about their experiences when they feel like it
- Be available – call, stop by to talk, share a meal or activity: Your presence and companionship are important
- Accept your own limitations. You cannot eliminate the distress your friend is experiencing