



c&fs EAP

Employee Assistance Program

Understanding the Impact of a Stressful Situation

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF A STRESSFUL SITUATION

A **stressful situation** is an extraordinary event or series of events which can be sudden or build up over time. They usually feel overwhelming.

The situations are often outside the range of ordinary human experience. They can lead to very intense emotional stress and challenge a person's normal coping skills. It is important to know that intense emotional responses are very common reactions to these situations.

The following may influence the intensity of a person's reaction:

- **Preventability:** feeling like you could have prevented this, or that you should have been prepared for something like this to happen.
- **Closeness to the situation:** this could be a physical proximity or an emotional connection to the event.
- **Connections to the person:** in situations where a person or persons are struggling, this can amplify how you experience the situation.
- **Other Stressors in Your Life:** if you are experiencing outside stressors in your daily life, before this situation began, it could increase how intense and impactful this event feels to you.

The stress response will change in intensity, duration, frequency and type of reaction over time. This response is very much like an emotional "wound" and will need time to heal. This does not mean that it is not a difficult experience and process to work through, but it is helpful to remind yourself that over time these reactions and feelings will subside.

If you believe that you are struggling to cope, call the main EAP number, 716.681.4300, to talk to our clinical team.

Common Reactions to a Stressful Situation

STRESS REACTIONS can be a response to a stressful situation and is manifested by feelings of loss of control and powerlessness that produces various physical, psychological, and social consequences.

To help yourself heal, it is helpful to recognize some of the common stress reactions of a trauma response. Some of the more common responses are listed below. It is important to note that there can be some positive reactions following a distressing situation, and not all individuals experience only negative reactions.

<i>DOMAIN</i>	<i>NEGATIVE RESPONSE</i>	<i>POSITIVE RESPONSE</i>
Cognitive	Confusion, disorientation, worry, intrusive thoughts and images, self-blame	Determination and resolve, sharper perception, courage, optimism, faith
Emotional	Shock, sorrow, grief, sadness, fear, anger, numb, irritability, guilt and shame	Feeling involved, challenged, mobilized
Social	Extreme withdrawal, interpersonal conflict	Social connectedness, altruistic helping behaviors
Physiological	Fatigue, headache, muscle tension, stomachache, increased heart rate, exaggerated startle response, difficulties sleeping	Alertness, readiness to respond, increased energy
Spiritual	Questioning faith, stop practicing, anger at higher power	Newfound faith

It is important to pay attention to the intensity of these reactions and seek help if you are experiencing any of the following after the event:

- You feel like your life is falling apart (an increase in experiencing marital problems, relationship concerns, family conflict, loss of friendships, and problems at school or work)
- You are suffering from chronic physical problems there does not seem to be any organic cause for
- You are constantly pre-occupied with thoughts and images of the event
- You are feeling desperately lonely and afraid
- You are unable to make decisions (even small ones) and difficulty concentrating
- You are having feelings of hopelessness, severe depression and/or rage
- You are becoming overly reliant on alcohol or other drugs to block the pain

What Can I Do to Help Myself Cope?

UNDERSTANDING RESILIENCY

Resiliency is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or even significant sources of stress. Two of the most helpful things to help recover from a traumatic event are **TALKING** and **TIME**. As mentioned above, a very common reaction to an event that feels traumatic and distressing, is to try to stop the intense feelings and emotions. It is important to recognize your emotions and reactions and can be helpful to talk about what you are experiencing to make sense of what you went through. Some other ways to help cope and build your personal resilience include:

Seek social supports

Using your supports can reduce feelings of distress and increase feeling safety. Reaching out to social supports, local supports, loved ones, or even a professional may be a helpful way to talk out what you are experiencing.

Relaxation Exercises

Your body might be more heightened due the incident and is experiencing a lot of stress. Take the time throughout the day, even if it is 5 minutes, to give your body and mind a break.

Get Back to Routine

Changes in how you think about the world are common after a major incident, working to get back to some normalcy and routine can help give a feeling of re-grounding.

Have feelings of control

Focus on something practical that you can do right now to manage the situation better.

Take care of yourself

Work to get adequate sleep and continue to eat regular and balanced meals throughout the day, consider exercising or participating in activities that you enjoy.

Support Groups

At times participating in a support group or a debrief after the incident may help you on your road to feeling recovered from the event

WARNING SIGNS THAT YOU MIGHT BE COPING IN AN INEFFECTIVE WAY

- Using alcohol or drugs to cope
- Overeating or failing to eat
- Working too much
- Doing risky things (driving recklessly, substance abuse, not taking adequate precautions)
- Extreme avoidance of thinking or talking
- Extreme withdrawal from family or friends
- Withdrawing from pleasant activities
- Violence or conflict
- Blaming others
- Not taking care of yourself

What Can I Do to Help Others Cope?

During a stressful situation, it might be uncomfortable to approach your coworkers to check in to see how they are doing, while you are struggling with your own feelings and reactions. At times, it is tough to know what to say or do to be helpful. Below are some tips in how you can support other coworkers in a way that conveys your concern and support:

ACKNOWLEDGE THE EVENT

Pretending that nothing happened may seem like the easiest thing to do, but it will not help an impacted individual recover. You may want to acknowledge the event with a kind gesture or express support.

JUST LISTEN

Very often, people feel a need to fill the silence or ask many questions. Asking very detailed questions about what happened usually comes across as intrusive. If your coworker wants to talk about the event, just listen. They may repeat the details many times; this is often an important part of the healing process. If they are not ready to talk yet, do not push it and allow them the space to talk about it when they are ready.

OFFER LONG-TERM EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

It takes longer to recover from a distressing incident than most people realize. For instance, a year might seem like enough time to “get over it”; yet the first anniversary is often very difficult for people to cope with.

OFFER PRACTICAL SUPPORT

Instead of the common ritual statement, “If there is anything I can do,” offer to do specific things such as providing rides to and from work, run errands, offer help with part of their workload (consult with a supervisor first) etc.

WATCH FOR SIGNS OF ABNORMAL REACTIONS

Behavior that would usually be considered strange is actually quite normal during this period. This may include irrational anger, crying spells, and a period of seeming ok followed by a relapse in behavior. If your coworker appears to be seriously distraught or if the symptoms seem to go on for weeks, and if they have not sought professional help, it might be a good idea to consult with your manager.