

CLEMSON

COUNSELING & PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES

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SURVIVING THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA

Some of life's encounters bring us happiness and joy while others result in sadness and pain. Sometimes very terrible things occur which shock us to the core of our being. When these events occur, we may feel our safety is at risk and be uncertain about what to do. These types of experiences are *traumatic*. They are outside the normal range of daily experience and highly threatening to our physical and emotional well being. They exceed the ways we usually problem-solve and take care of our selves. It is not unusual to feel *out of control*.

The Nature of Trauma

The severity of a person's reactions to trauma is often associated with the nature of the incident. The following are examples of factors that strongly impact survivors:

- The unpredictable timing of the incident
- Experiencing physical injury, either through accident or violence
- Having one's physical health or life threatened
- Having a near death experience
- Having a loved one's physical health or life threatened
- Feeling loss of control
- Witnessing the injury or death of others
- Surviving an experience where others have been injured or died
- Loss of home and security due to disaster
- Seeing or having contact with blood
- Prolonged exposure to danger

Reactions to Trauma

Persons react to trauma in ways that reflect their prior experiences with crisis, their distinctive personalities and problem-solving skills. There are, however, some generally shared experiences that often accompany trauma. Typical reactions may include some of the following:

- Confusion and a sense of detachment
- A numbness or "cloudy" perspective
- Heightened startle response
- Fear of situations that serve as a reminder of the event
- Physical and emotional reactions to sights, sounds, smell and feelings associated with the trauma
- Difficulties with getting to sleep, disturbing dreams or nightmares
- Intrusive and repetitive thoughts and images

- Difficulty with concentration and memory
- Intense emotional reactions, e.g., anger, crying, guilt, fear
- Loss of appetite
- Decreased emotional and physical energy
- Susceptibility to ailments (e.g., colds, joint soreness, sore muscles)
- Fear of trusting others
- Anxiousness about the future

Trauma impacts all areas of our life. These and other reactions occur in varying degrees and type to each person. There may even be a delay or later onset of the stress reaction. Becoming aware of and coping with our reactions is important to rebuilding our self-confidence and hope.

How We May Be Affected

Persons respond to tragedy in various ways. Normally we attempt to find ways to avoid the intrusion of painful memories or preoccupation with emotional and/or physical pain. Examples of how trauma may be affect people include:

- Increased sense of vulnerability
- Avoidance of responsibility
- Withdrawal from the support of family, friends and community
- Altering one's lifestyle such as increased risk taking
- Increased use of substances/drugs to socialize or reduce pain
- Experiencing flashbacks or altered states associated with the trauma
- Avoidance of situations that serve as a reminder of any aspect of the trauma
- Lack of confidence in returning to daily life activities, particularly those that may have been related to the trauma
- Reactions associated with the guilt of surviving when others did not
- Assuming undue responsibility for the outcomes of the incident
- Changing expectations of one's self and others
- Altering commitments in work or study activities
- Heightened agitation towards perceived offenders and concern for victims
- Disruption in one's worldview about fairness and justice
- Uncertainty about how to relate to others

What Helps Healing

There are ways to help the healing process. While there is not a cure for human suffering, over time healing can occur when attention is given to the needs of the whole person.

- Understand that trauma impacts a wide range human experience, our physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual well being. No part of the human experience is immune from the stress associated with trauma.
- Promote self-assurance by reminding yourself that you survived a painful experience and that it takes time to heal. Avoid comparing yourself to how others are handling their experience.

- Seek out persons who care for and support you. Share your reactions, thoughts and how the experience impacted you.
- Know that the reactions to trauma described are normal responses to a very abnormal experience. They occur in varying degrees of severity and type for each person.
- Consider writing a journal of your experience. Help those who care about you become aware of how you might react in certain situations.
- Seek to gain perspective on the experience. This is often helped by participation in counseling. Other aids may include meditation, reading, spiritual reflection or involvement in support groups.
- Trauma places stress on the human body and may result in illnesses that decrease energy and ability to concentrate. If needed, seek medical assistance.
- Promote your sense of hardiness through healthy nutrition and exercise.

How to Help a Friend:

- Be patient and understand there is not a formula for healing from the wounds of trauma
- Respect the other person's perspective. Persons may have different understandings of what occurred and how harmful it was. Avoid assigning blame.
- Support the person's need for understanding. You do not have to possess the answers to the difficult questions the trauma raises.
- Provide support at the level the survivor desires. Inquire about how to be helpful while respecting the other person's limits.
- Encourage your friend to seek assistance from a trained professional to help cope with the suffering that often accompanies the experience of trauma.

University Resources

- **Counseling and Psychological Services** (864) 656-2451
- **Redfern Health Center (appointment line)** (864) 656-1541
- **CU CARES** (864) 656-1294
- **University Police Department:** (864) 656-2222
- **Clemson University Employee Assistance Program:** (864) 656-2726
- **Clemson Campus Ministers Association. Pastor Chris Heavner, President** (864) 654-4232

Adapted from:

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