GUIDELINES FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL RECOVERY
FOLLOWING A TRAUMATIC EVENT

Nothing prepared you for this incident. We can predict that you experienced some emotional reactions and that some of these may stay with you and be troublesome. These guidelines bring to light natural emotional consequences. For some, the feelings will be momentary and passing. For others, they may endure.

1. You may experience trouble falling asleep or awakening abruptly after just a few hours even though you are physically exhausted and yearning for sleep.

2. Images of those involved may intrude on your consciousness. You may find that whether your eyes are open or closed, the image remains vivid. You may find that you have a recurring dream about the person or event. This is not unusual. If it persists, then it becomes an area that may benefit from professional attention.

3. Your usual ways of relaxing and letting-go may not be effective. When this happens, people sometimes feel that their emotions are beyond their control and this further increases their discomfort. You may find that people you usually can “talk-it-out-with” cannot tolerate talking about this with you and you can then feel very alone.

4. You may find yourself not hungry and when you do eat, you may have diarrhea, gas or vomiting.

5. Do not be surprised to find your energy level lower and your speed of thinking and memory changed. Part of this can be attributed to fatigue but is also a customary reaction to traumatic stress. There will be a temptation to hide this from others by resorting to self-prescribed medications and substances to keep going. It is self-defeating to do so.

6. Emotional numbness is a frequent consequence from dealing with intense stress as you have done. Your interest in sex and the love of others may be low. Many people find it hard to love and care for anyone else for a brief period of time after they have been through an experience like this. Others respond by needing more closeness to loved ones. Both responses are normal.

7. Life problems you are already coping with often seem larger and worse after an incident like this. Some may find themselves down on people or feeling like life in general is very bleak. A few people may begin to question if there is any hope for happiness in the future. These are serious concerns.
• Don’t try to cope with these feelings alone. Help is available, a phone call away. You can call Carebridge’s Employee Assistance Program (EAP) at 800-437-0911.

8. Some people experience bitterness at the mistakes that were made by others, decisions that were poor, or support that was not there when it was needed. Anger is an expected emotion and possibly a constructive one if there are ways to change future situations to make things better for others or for yourself.

To experience these consequences does not mean you are unusual or incapacitated. It does mean that if you want to cope with this emotional load and if you want to return to your usual feelings of being in control and functioning well, you must do three things:

• Set realistic expectations of yourself
• Avoid self-defeating behaviors
• Implement stress-releasing strategies

The Following Steps Are Some of the Most Effective Ways to Cope:

1. Expect that you will be affected by this event and that your stress may show to others. Understand that it is OK. Be honest about how you feel. Forgive yourself for not being up-to-par.

2. Let the feelings out. Talk about what you experienced, what you felt and what you did. Colleagues can help each other a lot just by sharing experiences and memories. It can be one-on-one or it can be a debriefing session. There is no one-way but avoid keeping it all locked inside.

3. Lean a little - Let others give to you in some small ways. Let them console you and express their concern. Use your support systems, not because you necessarily have to but because it will help to speed up recovery. Going-it-alone takes more time and is not always as effective.

4. Keep up your self-care.

• It is important to rest even though you don’t sleep.
• You may not feel like showering or shaving or changing clothes but it helps to recover if you don’t let yourself go.
• Cut out caffeine (coffee, colas) and alcohol while you heal. You will find that you recover more quickly.
• Drive carefully. It is easy to become careless and inattentive to risky situations and to fail to protect yourself.
5. Reestablish your familiar routines even though you are pressed for time. Give priority on your to-do lists to those activities such as running or rituals that are part of your life pattern. Use a checklist of things you need to do and eliminate the non-essentials, keeping in mind that ritual activities help the return of feelings of control and balance. They are not luxuries; they are essentials to be kept.

6. “Un-hook” for brief periods during the day. Give yourself some stand-down time from continuous work at least three times during the day, even if these times are just five minutes long. Don’t cheat by trying to eat and work at the same time and not really take time-away. Alternate active and inactive work times, when possible.

7. Permit yourself some moments of happiness. Avoid the guilt some experience at not worrying all the time or not thinking about the disaster all the time. You do not sustain those who are also recovering by staying concentrated only on problems and concerns. Permit yourself laughter. Keep your sense of humor.

8. Delay major decisions to make a life-change such as a job change, a move or divorce. It is often good and supportive to think about the future and how you want things to be different but regain your equilibrium, whenever possible, before making important decisions. If you cannot wait, then get advice before rushing into a major life change.

9. Spend time alone according to your needs. If silence, meditation, or prayer has been a supportive resource for you, then return to this support system as part of your coping strategies.

10. As you face the fact that life is not totally predictable, put your mind on the things that are steady and unchanging for you, whether they are friends, a spouse, or a belief system. Make some decisions about what is important for you to have and to preserve. Use some of your angry energy to invest in building plans or systems that will make it better for you or others in the future.

Although many of you are capable of surviving and recovering without special assistance, most of you might find debriefing sessions very helpful. It is a chance to ventilate some feelings to others who will understand. It is also a way to give some support to others whom you care about, just by listening, sharing, and validating.

If the high stress level has been prolonged or if you have made some self-defeating choices such as too much alcohol or substance use, confidential professional assistance is available to you. Professional counselors are available for telephone support by calling Carebridge’s EAP. We are here to help. You don’t have to cope alone.