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Supporting Recovery and Preventing PTSD after a Tragic Event

In the aftermath of a terrible event, people experience different levels of distress. The way in which this time of acute stress is handled can be very predictive of the long-term impact from what you have experienced. The most important things you can do right now are to:

1. Be patient and caring with yourself
2. Think about what makes you feel safe, and find ways help yourself feel safe and protected
3. Choose how, when and with whom you want to talk with about what you experienced
4. Find someone that you can call at any time if you feel like talking or want some support
5. Know that you will not always feel the way you do right now
6. You are starting a healing process related to this event
7. Identify a primary care provider and a mental health provider you can contact at any time, if needed.

These are the first steps in the mental health or emotional recovery process.

Many people may tell you that you has been traumatized or that you have experienced a traumatic event. “Trauma” is what the person experiences inside and is not the event itself, so one person may be experiencing traumatic stress while another may not. Because the experience is within each person, it is important to carefully watch for signs and symptoms, and other indicators unique to you. A check-in right now with a professional knowledgeable about trauma can help in your recovery process.

THE EARLY PHASE

In this acute or early phase, you may experience a wide range of thoughts, feelings, and behavioral changes ranging from almost nothing seeming different to severe anxiety, being tearful or angry, having flashbacks, increased heart rate, and so on. Watch for the following signs of distress that represent distinct changes from your usual way of behaving:

- Sleeping too much or too little (including difficulty getting to sleep, staying asleep, or waking up)
- Eating too much or too little
- Physically more active or less active
- Being more talkative or less talkative, or being unusually quiet, numb, or remote
- Being afraid to go to sleep or afraid of the dark (again, a distinct change from usual)
- Becoming angry, tearful, sad or upset
- Changes in elimination (bowel or bladder) including diarrhea or constipation
- Somatic problems like a stomachache, headache, nausea, body aches, etc.
- Fear or big responses to loud or sudden noises, sirens, household sounds, etc.
- Wanting important people (family & close friends) always close by, or not wanting to see anyone
- Increase daydreaming or feeling like time is moving in slow motion
- Wanting to return to the scene or feeling like you never want to return to the scene
- Other sudden, new changes in the way you feel, think, behave, or interact with others

These signs and symptoms are indications of: 1) the distress people feel about the unpredictable nature of the event; 2) recovering from the enormity of the event itself; or, 3) the fear of recurrence. Once again, consult a mental health and/or primary health care provider if anything presents that worries you. Any changes most often return to normal in 6-8 weeks. If they do not, find a mental health provider to consult with. If you feel like hurting yourself or others, or if you are unable to care for yourself, consult a mental health provider immediately.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Finding ways to help yourself regulate (or get calm) right now are very important for your gradual recovery. Trusted people who are attuned and caring are particularly helpful. Familiar routines can also be useful in feeling a sense of familiarity and predictability. So keeping or returning to the rhythms of your daily routines and times of going to bed, waking up, eating, bathing, etc. can be very therapeutic.

You may notice that your desire to talk about your experience comes and goes. It can be extremely distressing to recall and recount the memory of what happened when you are not ready to do this. When you feel ready to talk, find a trusted friend or provider who is ready to listen. This may happen in short bursts, and then the desire to talk about the event passes.

The development of a condition called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a possibility after an event like this. However, the way you care for yourself during this immediate time after the disaster can reduce the risk of PTSD developing. Over the next several weeks, changes in your thoughts, feelings or behaviors should slowly return to typical. However, if you notice physical or behavioral changes that are severe, worsen suddenly at any time, or persist for more than a 6-8 weeks, consult a professional skilled in working with mental health needs related to trauma. Such professionals include physicians, counselors, psychologists, nurses, social workers, educators, clergy persons, etc. who are trained and skilled in working with trauma-related concerns. How can you find out if a provider has such skills? Ask them about their training, certification, and/or endorsement in this kind of work.

In addition, you can visit the Neurosequential Network's website at: <https://www.neurosequential.com/impact> to look for providers in your area who have specialized training in the recognition and treatment of trauma. For more information on children and trauma in general, visit the Neurosequential Network at www.neurosequential.com or the ChildTrauma Academy's informational website at: www.childtrauma.org.

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