Traumatic Events Information Sheet

You have recently experienced a traumatic event. You may have been exposed to sights, sounds, smells, emotions, thoughts, or demands that exceed normal life experiences. Even though the event may be completed, you may now be experiencing some strong emotional after shocks. It is very common, in fact quite normal, for people to experience stress reactions when they have survived a traumatic event. These emotional after shocks may occur immediately, a few hours, or a few days later. And in some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions occur.

The signs or symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks, or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event. With adequate support, the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. However, the traumatic event may be so painful that professional assistance from a grief counselor may help to work through intense feelings of fear, loss, anger, and/ or guilt surrounding the traumatic event. Grief support groups may also be helpful in creating a “new normal”. Because it is likely that those closest to us are also grieving this traumatic loss, they may have limited emotional resources as well. Seeking additional support outside one’s own circle of friends and family does not imply weakness, to the contrary it indicates a willingness to actively take healing steps in a positive direction rather than merely reacting to stress symptoms as they occur.

Common signs and symptoms following a trauma:

- repetitive, distressing thoughts of the event
- nightmares, frequent waking, and/ or difficulty falling asleep
- flashbacks so intense that you feel or act as though the trauma was happening all over again
- an attempt to avoid thoughts or feelings associated with the trauma
- an attempt to avoid activities associated with the trauma
- emotional numbness- being out of touch with your feelings
- losing interest in activities that used to give you pleasure
- persistent symptoms of anxiety, such as difficulty concentrating, difficulty making decisions, disorientation, or startling easily
- other physical symptoms may include: nausea, sweating, diarrhea, dizziness, rapid heart beat, and headaches
- other emotional symptoms may include: intense feelings of fear for self or others, anger, guilt, depression, irritability, and/ or feeling isolated.
Helpful Hints for Handling Stress Reactions Following a Traumatic Event

For Yourself:
- Try to rest a bit more.
- Contact friends and/ or family.
- Talk with people you trust.
- Have someone stay with you for at least a few hours or a few days.
- Avoid alcohol- it is a depressant.
- Don’t try to numb out distressing thoughts, dreams or flashbacks.
- Journal thoughts and feelings as needed, but no longer than 15 minutes at a sitting.
- Use relaxation and breathing techniques that relax your body and your mind.
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible.
- Eat well balanced and regular meals (or nutritious snacks throughout the day in event of nausea) and drink plenty of water to avoid dehydration.
- Avoid large amounts of sugar and caffeine as they may intensify symptoms of agitation and restlessness.
- Exercise, such as a 20 minute walk, especially when supported by a caring listener, can reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression and improve sleep.
- Find an experienced counselor if the feelings become too prolonged or intense.

For Family Members and Friends:
- Listen carefully without interruption.
- Spend time with the traumatized person.
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear even if they have not asked for help.
- Help with everyday tasks like cooking, cleaning, errands, child-care.
- Balance the traumatized person’s need for quiet alone time with adequate social support.
- Be sensitive to grief upsurges, and offer your support during difficult times such as holidays, birthdays, and the anniversary of the traumatic event.
- Don’t be afraid to talk about the person who died. Those who are bereaved are often comforted by the fact that others have positive memories of the person who died.
- Don’t try overly hard to divert the individual by talking about something else. Sometimes it is best just to be silently present.
- Don’t take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Don’t tell them they are “lucky it wasn’t worse”. Traumatized people are not consoled by platitudes. Instead tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred, and that you want to understand and assist them.

If the symptoms described above are severe or last longer than six weeks, the traumatized person may need professional counseling. Contact a counselor through your local health care provider or call St. Mary’s Grief Support Services at (218)786-4402.