

# CSUB Counseling Center

661-654-3366

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## Common Responses to and Ways to Cope With Traumatic Stress

Although trauma affects people differently, there are some common reactions you may experience. These signs may begin immediately, or you may feel fine for a couple of days or even weeks, and then suddenly be hit with a reaction. The important thing to remember is that these are quite normal; although you may feel some distress, you're probably experiencing a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

Same day crisis intervention is available through the CSUB Counseling Center (654-3366) to help students manage acute personal crises and provide them with the skills to function and meet the demands of a campus environment.

### Some common responses to Traumatic events are...

#### Physical Reactions:

- fatigue
- hyperactivity or "nervous energy"
- appetite changes
- muscle tension
- headaches
- heart palpitations or pains in the chest
- difficulty sleeping/nightmares

#### Emotional Reactions:

- shock/numbness
- emptiness
- sadness
- feelings of anxiety or helplessness
- irritability
- anger
- excessive jumpiness or tendency to be startled
- guilt

#### Cognitive Reactions

- denial
- worry/obsessive thoughts
- hyper vigilance
- decreased concentration and attention
- difficulty thinking
- confusion
- racing thoughts
- problems with memory
- intrusive thoughts or images
- flashbacks or "reliving" the event
- thoughts of death or dying

## Ways to cope with Traumatic Stress

- Be tolerant of your reactions – they are normal and will subside with time for most people. Acknowledge that it may be a while before you are entirely back to “normal”.
- Give yourself time. You may feel better for a while, and then have a “relapse”. This is normal. Allow plenty of time to adjust to the new realities.
- Spend time with others, even though it may be difficult at first. It’s easy to withdraw when you are hurt, but now you need the company of others.
- Talk about the experience with your friends. For most people, talking helps relieve some of the intense emotions we feel under stress.
- Try to keep your normal routine. Staying active will help keep your mind on events other than the trauma, will give you a sense of comfort with familiar tasks, and will help put some psychological “distance” between you and the event.
- Be sure to eat, sleep, keep active and exercise; physical activity is an excellent way to cope with the physical and emotional experiences associated with trauma.
- Express thoughts and feelings by journaling, writing a poem, or some other form of artistic expression.
- Structure your time even more carefully than usual. It’s normal to forget things when you are under stress. Keep lists, and double-check any important work.
- Maintain control where you can. Make small decisions, even if you feel it’s unimportant or you don’t care. It’s important to maintain control in some areas of your life.
- Let the event activate you to do something about the causes of the trauma or allow you to feel more in control, e.g., join groups that address issues related to the event, look for ways to help others.
- Ask for help if you are particularly bothered by your reactions to the event, or notice that they interfere substantially with your social life or work.
- Avoid immersing yourself in 24 hour media coverage of a traumatic event; take a break from television, radio, and internet news stories.
- Avoid numbing emotions with drugs and alcohol, as this can intensify emotional distress after they wear off

\*Adapted from a pamphlet developed by Campus Health Services of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (4/3/07)