

## COPING WITH TRAUMATIC EVENTS

Many kinds of traumatic events, including significant acts of terrorism, can affect people who are directly or indirectly involved. It has been estimated that up to 50% of the U.S. population is exposed to at least one traumatic event in a lifetime. Reactions to trauma can involve emotional, physical, cognitive, and behavioral changes, and they can encompass both normal reactions to abnormal situations and more lasting difficulties that may benefit from formal mental health treatment. Some normal reactions to abnormal situations include:

- Emotional symptoms of fear (even feelings of panic), shock, denial, sadness or grief, survivor guilt, and intense feelings or abrupt and strong mood fluctuations.
- Physical sensations such as nausea, dizziness, muscle tightness, headaches, fatigue, sweating, shortness of breath
- Cognitive problems can include forgetfulness, difficulty making decisions, confusion, blaming others, being more or less aware of surroundings, being more or less alert
- Behavioral changes can include social withdrawal or changes in communication with others, angry outbursts, changes in sleep patterns, changes in food or alcohol consumption, changes in activity level, or more frequent visits to doctors for physical complaints.
- Sensitivity to abrupt sounds may also increase. That is, persons may startle more easily even when normal events occur (e.g., the phone ringing, a car alarm going off, etc.) This increased startle response is not atypical and generally passes with time.

It is also important to limit time spent attending to terrorist-related media. These events are highly charged, particularly for individuals with family and friends in the area and those who have experienced previous trauma such as the Oklahoma City bombing. We all want to remain informed of the current findings. However, exposure to the arousing pictures and sounds may cause prior symptoms to recur. The key word here is "moderation". If you feel uncomfortable while watching the coverage or reading the papers, take a break. If you find yourself unable to leave the television, turn it off and redirect your energies by taking a walk, writing a letter, or journaling.

Some positive coping techniques have been identified that can help people get through very stressful times. These include using social supports such as talking to spouse, family, friends or coworkers; getting adequate rest and exercise; talking to clergy or praying; pursuing hobbies or creative activities; and relying on rituals such as memorial services or visits to memorial sites. Sometimes the "tincture of time" will help as people work through very stressful life situations.

When reactions are prolonged or severe, the individual may need to seek help from a mental health professional. Some of the mental health problems that individuals may suffer from include:

- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): Symptoms for more than a month of re-experiencing the trauma through nightmares, flashbacks or intrusive memories; avoidance of reminders of the trauma; and physical reactivity such as irritability, sleep problems, and strong startle response.
- Depression: Sad or irritable mood for more than 2 weeks with low energy, sleep disturbances, appetite changes, decreased concentration, inability to take pleasure in life, and other symptoms
- Panic attacks: intense, time-limited episodes of anxiety, palpitations, shortness of breath, numbness and tingling, hot or cold flashes, fear of dying, and others.
- Generalized anxiety: general excessive worry and physical feelings of fatigue, restlessness, muscle tension, and concentration problems, irritability, and disrupted sleep.
- Problems with alcohol or drug use: People may use these substances to "numb out" unpleasant feelings, or a pre-existing substance use problem may worsen.
- Eating disorders: People may overeat or not eat enough to the point of jeopardizing their health.
- Maladaptive behaviors: Some persons respond to this kind of stress by overspending, driving recklessly, or engaging in other behaviors with high risk for negative outcome.

Doctors may prescribe medications to help these problems, and the individual may benefit from various types of counseling or psychotherapy, such as cognitive/behavioral or interpersonal therapies. If you feel you need professional help, you can contact your doctor or counselor.

If you or someone you know needs someone to talk to about a traumatic event on an urgent basis, you can call a Crisis Hotline. The Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services has a number you can call to speak with someone about your distress. This is a toll-free number: 1-800 522-9054.