

## **You Are Not Going Crazy!**

### **Stress Reactions Following a Sudden Traumatic Experience**

Stress reactions following a sudden traumatic experience are also called acute stress disorder, psychological shock, mental shock, or simply shock. It is a psychological condition arising in response to a terrifying or traumatic event, or witnessing a traumatic event. The reactions may also arise following a sudden loss, injury, or complicated illness. An individual may go through a period of about 30 days when they may experience feelings of fear, anxiety, flashbacks, helplessness or avoidance as well as some physical reactions to the trauma. These feelings and reactions are normal and can be expected during such times. They and usually go away after a person has had a chance to identify healthy ways to reduce their anxiety. These feelings are normal reactions to extraordinary traumatic events. Help in coping with these feelings is available from trained community caregivers. However, if these reactions last longer than a month, a person may be developing Post-Traumatic Stress disorder (PTSD) and may need additional assistance.

Acute Stress Disorder includes:

1. Feelings of jumpiness or panic.
2. Feelings of numbness, being in a daze or in shock over what has happened.
3. Feelings of despair and hopelessness.
4. Forgetfulness about parts of the tragedy or things that need to get done.
5. Difficulty concentrating while trying to do other things (i.e., reading or watching TV)
6. Difficulty falling or staying asleep.
7. Nightmares during sleep.
8. Daydreaming and thinking about the event incessantly as well as things that could, should or might have been different.
9. Loss of interest in work, socializing or other activities previously enjoyed.
10. Difficulty resolving issues related to the tragedy or in obtaining necessary resources.

A wide range of physical symptoms may occur, such as: Headaches; muscle and joint pain, twitches or shakiness; stomach ache, diarrhea, indigestion, heartburn, frequent urination; sweating, dry mouth, cold hands; fatigue and irritability; substance abuse; sexual dysfunction

There are several positive steps an individual can address acute stress reactions:

1. Join a peer support network that can understand and share experiences.
2. Express feelings and memories by writing in journals or letters, or use a creative expression such as music, drawing, painting, sculpting, singing, dancing, etc.
3. Ensure you are eating well-balanced and nutritious meals, drinking water and getting exercise. Avoid alcohol and non-prescribed drugs.
4. If the tragedy has disrupted your daily routine, reestablish that familiar routine as soon as possible.
5. List all the issues you need to address following the loss and deal with them one at a time.
6. Avoid making any major life changes immediately.
7. Get help from reliable people who can advise you on legal and financial issues.
8. Remember to involve children who are impacted by traumatic events in age-appropriate activities and ensure that they are emotionally and physically cared for as well.
9. Seek professional assistance and support by trained mental health trauma specialists, chaplains and/or pastoral caregivers. Various therapies have been developed to help individuals address acute trauma reactions.

*Greenville Mental Health Center, Greenville, South Carolina  
and the Association of Traumatic Stress Specialists*