

Mental Health Care following Stressful Events

Frequently Asked Questions

1. I am exhausted and often feel like I need a nap... what is wrong with me?

Chances are there is nothing “wrong” with you. What you are feeling are expected responses to a stressful situation. It is expected to feel anxious, angry, fearful, exhausted, irritable, or sadness following a stressful event. Allow yourself time to recover. Take that nap; listen to your body’s needs.

2. I am irritable and short with people... that is just not me... what can I do?

Take care of your health! It is important to pay attention to your own physical health as well as your mental health. Maintain proper nutrition and get adequate sleep and exercise. Keep normal routines. Stressful events create a disruption in everyday living and disrupt people’s sense of safety and security.

Focus on the positive! There are still good things that are happening in our lives and it is important to continue to experience positive events even when stress occurs. Celebrate no matter how small or significant an event might seem.

Share your thoughts and feelings... you are not alone nor do you have to recover alone. Use your support systems, family, friends, EAP, or Campus Counseling Services.

3. I feel like I am living in two separate worlds~ my world of work and my personal world that involves “The Flood”... any suggestions?

Be patient~ both with yourself and with others. Take care of your physical health; this in turn will allow you to cope with the emotional stresses. Acknowledge that you are trying to balance between two very different environments. Let your supervisor know what you are currently experiencing. Let your supervisor and/or colleagues know what you need. If emotions persist consider contacting a trained mental health professional to discuss your situation. The grieving process is very real for you~ stages include denial; bargaining; anger; depression; and acceptance. One does not necessarily pass through each stage in order or complete a stage before moving to another stage. These stages tend to be fluid~ contributing to the mixed emotions or emotional roller coaster. Everyone progresses through the process at their own pace. Do not hesitate to share your experiences with those around you (appropriately) as this may provide others to share their own experiences and ‘normalize’ the emotions.

4. Everyone around me seems to be ‘business as usual’ or handling everything just fine; I don’t feel this way... will things ever be ‘normal’ again?

Often symptoms resolve spontaneously after a couple of days or weeks. Those that persist and/or worsen after a few weeks may indicate a more serious problem. If this is a concern, contact a trained mental health professional, contact your EAP; contact your

Campus Counseling Services Office. It is possible that other stress disorders may develop such as anxiety disorder, PTSD, and/or depression.

5. I didn't even get to say good bye to my roommate; classmate; teammate... it just doesn't seem fair!

You are exactly right~ it isn't fair. What you are feeling is to be expected~ cheated of sorts. You had no closure to your academic year; season; classes; dorm life; and/or departure. You have not had an opportunity to transition out of the academic year or routine. You may experience many of the things discussed in this document. However, anger and sadness may be two emotions that are heightened due to your experience.

Depending on where you are living; it may seem that people around you are acting as 'business-as-usual' and don't even realize what you are experiencing. You may need to let your family and friends know what you are feeling and what you need. Remember that those around you did not experience the stressful event that you did; their worlds have not changed; only yours. Be patient with yourself. You have missed the opportunity to have closure to your school year.

If symptoms persist and/or worsen after a couple of weeks~ consider contacting a mental health professional or contact VCSU Campus Counseling Services (845-7424).

6. My family seems so disrupted... my teens are irritable, withdraw, absorbed with friends not family, my elementary student are quiet...

Know what to expect from or for family members:

Preschool (ages 1-5): Children in this age group are particularly vulnerable to disruption of their previously secure world. This age group looks to family for comfort; abandonment is a major fear in this age group. Responses may include: thumb sucking, bed wetting, fears of darkness, clinging to parents.

Helpful hints: Encourage expression through play; give frequent attention; plan calming, comforting pre-bedtime activities; allow *short term* changes in sleep arrangements.

Early childhood (ages 5-11): Regressive behavior is most typical of this group.

Responses may include: irritability, whining, clinging, aggressive behavior at home or school, overt competition with siblings;

Helpful hints: Patience and tolerance; play sessions with adults and peers; opportunities for structures but not demanding chores.

Pre-adolescent (ages 11-14): Peer reactions are especially significant in this age group.

The child needs to feel that his/her fears are both appropriate and shared by others.

Responses may include: sleep disturbance, rebellion; refusal to do chores, school problems.

Helpful Hints: Involvement with same age group activity; structured responsibilities; additional individual attention and consideration.

Adolescent (ages 14-18): Most of the activities and interest of the adolescent are focused in his/her own age group peers; distressed by the disruption of their peer group activities.

Helpful Hints: Encourage resumption of social activities, athletics, clubs, etc. encourage discussion of experiences with peers, family members, significant others, encourage, but do not insist upon, discussion of fears within the family setting.

Plan an activity for your entire family so that you and your children feel the strength of your family unity.

7. I didn't 'lose' anything during the flood; why do I feel unsettled too?

You don't need to be a direct 'victim' of the stressful event to feel the effects. Whether you or your home, possessions were directly affected does not matter at this point. The fact is you are feeling the effects of the event. Adhere to any of the above suggestions. You may be experiencing some "guilt" for not being a victim... 'why them and not me'; 'how did I escape the event'... the care for you is the same as anyone else that is experiencing the stress.

8. I feel worse this week than I did during 'the flood' days.

Feelings of distress, anger, guilt, etc. can develop at any time or can be expected within days of the event. More severe and/or persistent symptoms can occur weeks or months after the event.

During the actual event or at the height of the event people tend to respond in a survival mode and do not realize the stress on the body and mind. During the survival mode you may deny the need for rest, nutrition, self-care. You are likely to override stress and fatigue with dedication and commitment.

However, you have experienced a stressful event; our bodies and minds need to react to that event. Once things begin to return to a somewhat normalcy~ our bodies will respond to the stress it has been experiencing.

You may have strong feelings right away or you may not notice a change until much later, after the event is over. Stress can change how you act with your friends and family. It will take time for you to feel better and for your life to return to normal. Give yourself time to heal.

9. I have heard that women tend to react to stress differently than men... is this true?

Some researchers think that females handle stress in unique ways: females *Tend-and-Befriend* rather than *Fight-or-Flight*.

Tend: Women protect and care for others

Befriend: Women seek out and receive social support

During stress, women tend to care for others and find support from their female friends. Women's bodies make chemicals that are believed to promote these responses. One such chemical is oxytocin, which has a calming effect during stress. Women also have the hormone estrogen, which boosts the effects of oxytocin. Men, however, have high levels of testosterone during stress, which blocks the calming effects of oxytocin and could cause hostility, withdrawal, and possible anger.

I encourage you to read the additional information on how males and females differ on stress management. Information is included on the Counseling Services webpage.

Things to remember when trying to understand stressful events.

- **No one that experiences a stressful situation is untouched by it.**
- **It is normal to feel anxious**
- **Acknowledging our feelings helps recovery**
- **Focusing on strengths and abilities help the healing process**
- **Accepting help from community programs and resources is healthy**

Do Not:

- **Force people to share their stories.**
- **Tell people what you think they should be feeling, thinking or doing.**
- **Criticize existing services or relief activities in front of people in need of these services.**