

Trauma—how our body reacts

Events that endanger life or property can provoke distress in some people. Examples of such events include car accidents, bushfires, floods, sudden illness or traumatic death in the family.

Typical reactions

Everyone is different, but there are some common reactions most people experience when faced with an unexpected crisis. The typical response includes:

- Shock—difficulty believing in what has happened, feeling numb and confused.
- Continuing alarm—the person feels like the danger is still there or the event is continuing.
- Distress reaction—once the reality of the situation has sunk in, the state of high alert changes into an emotional reaction.
- Let-down—after the crisis is over, exhaustion may become obvious. Emotional reactions to the event are felt during the let-down phase.

The mind and body during the state of distress

During a distressing event, our mind may shift into high alert. Signs include:

- pain, tiredness and emotions are ignored
- ability to focus on details of the event
- feeling ready, or even impatient, to deal with the event
- no thoughts beyond dealing with the experience
- the ability to concentrate for as long as necessary.

During a distressing or frightening event, affected individuals may experience the following signs:

- plenty of physical energy
- the ability to work hard for as long as necessary
- reduced awareness of physical needs—fatigue, hunger or pain go unnoticed.

Stress overload

Emergency mode shuts down the body's feedback system so we can keep going beyond our resources. However, being in emergency mode is exhausting. Nobody can keep going for long periods without losing physical and mental efficiency. If you get advance warning of a potentially stressful event (for example, a nearby bushfire is heading towards your property), you may become stressed before the crisis hits. Stress overload is also experienced if the event goes on for a long time.

Warning signs and prevention of stress overload

A person experiencing stress overload can't always recognise the signs. It may be up to someone else to point out that they need to rest for a while. The signs of stress overload include:

- being exhausted and tired, but not wanting to stop
- feeling impatient, agitated and anxious
- being unable to think clearly, plan or make decisions
- taking on more and more responsibility for managing the crisis
- becoming upset with other people's involvement
- feeling preoccupied about details of the crisis and forgetting the bigger picture
- getting emotional, angry or blaming people for the crisis
- getting side-tracked by 'what if' thoughts
- taking risks or performing actions without first thinking it through
- cutting corners, ignoring safety procedures.

Ways to reduce the likelihood of stress overload and keep you performing at your best include:

- Have regular rest breaks before you are exhausted.
- Make time to eat and drink regularly.
- Avoid taking unnecessary risks. You won't be able to manage the situation if you get hurt.
- Put aside feelings and fears. Concentrate on putting your energies into practical efforts.
- Take time out for yourself, or confide in one other person if you feel emotional.
- Manage feelings of hopelessness by focusing on practical tasks that you can achieve.
- Don't think further ahead than is necessary. Keep focused on what is needed next.

Things to remember

- Everyone is different, but people tend to experience similar reactions when faced with an unexpected crisis. These include shock, alarm, distress reaction and let-down.
- The state of stress is exhausting and can't be maintained for too long without a drop in physical and mental efficiency.
- Don't let yourself or others go into stress overload by ignoring the need for rest, nourishment and support.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Your local community health centre
- Counsellor
- Psychologist
- Lifeline 13 11 14

If at any time you are worried about your mental health call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24.

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