Traumatic Events: Dealing with the Emotional Aftermath

Joe recently witnessed an industrial accident in which a co-worker was seriously injured. He can't get thoughts about it out of his mind. He is also uneasy when he is near the area where the accident happened.

Anne was knocked to the ground and had her purse snatched on the way home from work. A few days later she started having nightmares.

Garry received minor injuries in a car collision. Weeks after the physical injuries have healed, he still feels depressed.

What do these three people have in common? They have each been involved in a traumatic event that has caused emotional upset.

What is a Traumatic Event?

A traumatic event can be described as one that falls outside the confines of a normal day-to-day experience. It is an event that is threatening to our own lives or welfare; or it is one that is threatening to the welfare or life of a friend or loved one.

No one can ever be sure how they will react to this type of event. For instance, we are all given instruction on how to act during a fire drill. But when a fire actually happens, we may react quite differently. The reason? The body takes over and the survival mechanism kicks in. Chemicals that are released in the blood stream can cause us to flee the situation or to stay and attack and react in a defensive way depending upon the nature of the threatening situation. Many of our responses to a traumatic event are automatic and, therefore, unavoidable.

Trauma Reactions

The upsetting psychological symptoms that Joe, Anne and Garry are experiencing are called trauma reactions. These emotional responses can range from mild to severe and disabling. The intensity of the experience will usually dictate the intensity of the reaction. For instance, a person who witnesses a car accident may have a milder trauma reaction than someone who is actually involved in the accident. And, of course, a person who is severely injured is likely to experience a more severe reaction than someone who escapes without a scratch.

People such as firefighters and members of a police force—in other words, those who are often confronted with critical incidents—will usually experience a less intense reaction than the rest of us.

More often than not, the initial response to a traumatic event is a feeling of numbness. After that, reactions may include sleep problems and changes in eating habits. Some people even experience situational amnesia —they don't remember what happened. Emotional reactions such as depression, anxiety and agitation are common. A startled response when encountering something that reminds the person of the incident is another typical response.

Reactions Vary in Duration

The duration of this acute period of stress varies with the duration of the event. For instance, witnessing a robbery that takes place in two minutes is quite different from being held hostage for hours.

Another factor that influences how quickly one recovers from the emotional aftermath of trauma is how close one is to being a victim or the one whose life is threatened. It stands to reason that witnessing an air crash from a safe distance is less traumatic than being a survivor of the actual crash.

Recovery may also be slower for those who were suffering from emotional problems before the event, have

suffered a physical injury, or who lack a strong support system of friends and relatives.

Although the majority of people recover from a traumatic event in less than six months, there is a small number who are unable to adjust satisfactorily after the six months. This problem can be prevented by seeking help as soon as possible after the traumatic event.

Helping Ourselves to Cope What can trauma victims such as Joe, Anne and Garry do to help themselves?

- They can talk about the critical incident with family and friends. Joe will also find it helpful to discuss the accident with co-workers, because the incident happened at work. Talking about the experience helps to contain the stress and helps the victim to understand what has happened.

- They can try to get adequate rest, eat a balanced diet, and engage in light physical exercise such as walking for fifteen minutes to half an hour each day. Coping with emotional problems is a little easier when we are in good physical health.

- They can try to realize that the unpleasant symptoms they are experiencing are normal and that others have experienced them.

- Finally, while timing is a consideration, it is important not to make radical changes in their lives in an effort to avoid a similar circumstance. There comes a time when they have to return to normal activities.

None of us is exempt from traumatic incidents in our lives. What's more, these events may knock us down for a time. But it's reassuring to know that they don't have to keep us down. With the help of others, we have the emotional resilience to pick ourselves up and get on with our lives.