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Tips for Wellbeing No 9

Coping with Stressful Events

What is a stressful event?

A stressful event is a powerful and overwhelming incident. Often they are experiences which are life threatening, or where there has been a significant potential threat to someone's physical or psychological wellbeing.

It is quite normal to have a range of emotional or physical reactions after a stressful event and the extent of the impact can vary depending on the nature of the event, someone's previous experiences and coping resources and the support available. Stress reactions can often remain after the event is over; though usually subside in the following days or weeks.

Common reactions include those that are physical, cognitive (thoughts), emotional and behavioural.

Physical

- > Increase alertness
- > Easily startled
- > Fatigue
- > Sleep disturbances
- > Aches and pains

Thoughts

- > Visual images or memories of the event
- > Nightmares
- > Reduced concentration
- > Memory difficulties
- > Confused thinking
- > Thinking 'What if...'

Emotional

- > Fear or anxiety
- > Feeling 'numb' or detached
- > Anger
- > Sadness
- > Guilt

Behavioural

- > Avoiding places or activities that serve as reminders
- > Withdrawing socially
- > Reducing engagement in regular activities

The things described above are normal reactions to a stressful event and they are part of adjusting, making some sense of what happened, and coming to terms with it. With understanding and support from others (e.g. family, friends, colleagues) things may resolve more quickly. Recovering from a stressful event doesn't mean forgetting your experience or having no reaction when remembering it. It means, over time becoming less reactive and more confident in your ability to cope.

What can be done about it?

There are a range of things you can do to look after yourself in recovering from a stressful event.

- > Be aware that you have been through a stressful experience and allow yourself to experience your reactions to it. It may help to remind yourself that your reactions are normal.
- > Look after yourself by getting plenty of rest (even if you can't sleep), regular exercise, and by eating regular, nutritious meals.
- > Try to resume your routine as soon as possible-though take it easy on yourself.
- > Try not to unnecessarily avoid activities or places.
- > Do avoid the use of alcohol or other drugs to cope.
- > Where possible, postpone making any major decisions. Conversely making smaller, daily decisions can help with feeling more in control.
- > Structure your days, and schedule at least one enjoyable thing each day.
- > Do things you have found relaxing (for example, taking a warm bath, walking, gardening, practicing a breathing exercise and so on...)
- > Talking to others who are likely to understand may be helpful.
- > Let those close to you know what you need. For example letting them know when you are tired, and need time out, or need to talk.
- > You could speak to a counsellor (details for making an appointment with a CIT counsellor are below)

For further reference

Website:

- > *Phoenix Australia (Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health)-tip sheets*
<http://phoenixaustralia.org/recovery/fact-sheets-and-booklets/>

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