



Stiftung Mayday

Information to help deal with reactions to a critical event

This information sheet is intended to help those affected by a critical incident to better understand and cope with their possible reactions to a critical event. About 20% of the people involved in such an event are affected afterwards. These reactions sometimes appear even after seemingly harmless events and most appear soon after, but they can also take a few days, weeks or months to surface. They can be single, isolated reactions or a combination of several.

All of the following reactions are both normal and healthy. If they appear a recovery phase of usually a few days is sufficient. On the rear of this information sheet some additional information is given on how to support your recovery process.

The range of possible and normal reactions include the following:

- 1) **Emotional:** fear, guilt, helplessness, insecurity, anxiety, feeling dejected, anger, (strong) grief, panic attacks, easier irritability, feeling depressed, lack of emotion, emotional instability
- 2) **Behavioral:** hectic, restlessness, sleeplessness, higher intake of stimulants, hypersensitivity, avoidance, retraction, changes in normal use of language, changes in the social environment, emotional outbreaks, uncontrolled movements, risk seeking: taking up risky hobbies, seeking adrenaline rushes
- 3) **Physical:** nausea, loss of appetite, trouble sleeping, muscle pains, increase in heart rate, breathing problems, breaking into sweat, dizzy spells, tiredness, impaired vision, vomiting, chills, headache, high blood pressure, symptoms of shock, hyperventilation,
- 4) **Cognitive (mental):** trouble concentrating, trouble memorizing, trouble remembering, disorientation concerning time and/or people, higher/ lower reaction time, general confusion, nightmares, distrust, difficulties in decision making, better/ worse perception of ones surrounding, shorter attention span

In the unlikely case that these reactions do not significantly improve after a period of four weeks, it could be that these reactions can be understood as symptoms and seeking help should be considered. In this case we offer support from our side and from our network of professionals.

Recommendations on how to deal with your reactions

Should one or more of the before mentioned reactions arise after an event it is absolutely normal and is no reason for concern. In order to reduce or terminate them you should follow these tips.

- If possible, exercise but keep it moderate for 30 minutes with a pulse rate of 120 beats/min. Afterwards drink at least ½ litre water. The exercise and the fluids increase your metabolism and your body discards additional stress hormones faster. Keep in mind that your pulse might be higher than usual and the 120 beats are reached faster. This is normal under stress. In general, a lower pulse rate is more efficient when trying to reduce stress through sports. Repeat this as often as you feel is helpful.
- Try to eat as you normally do. If you are lacking appetite this may be due to a higher level of adrenaline in your system that contracts your stomach. It helps to eat in small bites. Set a clock to 30 minutes or ask somebody to remind you when to take the next bite. If you repeat this 3 to 5 times your regular feeling of hunger will return and you will be able to eat normally.
- Try not to drink more alcohol than you normally would. Alcohol decreases the dreaming phase of the sleep cycle and therefore increases the time needed to recuperate. The less alcohol you drink the faster you recover.
- Try to remember what has helped you in a situation like this before or what helps you in general. Go with what comes to mind even if you might lack motivation at first. It will help you again this time.

If you follow these tips your hormone household will return to normal faster, your regular rhythm of sleeping will return and you will go back to your normal behaviour and overall feeling.

Make sure that you do not make decisions with long lasting consequences directly after an incident as long as you will not have fully recovered. You may be sorry about the decision later.

For family members and friends:

- Listen proactively and attentively, even when the descriptions are repeated
- Do not minimize the event (“it could have been worse” etc.). Instead show sympathy for the situation
- Do not take emotional comments personally
- Try to be open and take the described emotions seriously
- Help with the daily duties (cooking, cleaning, child care etc.)
- Offer help even when it is not asked for directly

For any question, please feel free to contact (24/7):

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www.stiftung-mayday.de/en/cism-contact/

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