

Post-Traumatic Stress reactions are physical, emotional and mental responses that may occur in persons who have been victims of particularly threatening or disorienting events.

Not all victims react in the same way or with the same intensity. Often, the intensity of the reaction seems to have little relationship to the severity of the event that has caused the stress. A person may have a profoundly powerful reaction to an event that seems much less serious to one's friends or family. Another person may seem totally non-stressed after an event that seems overwhelming to others.

Some victims regain a relatively high degree of self-confidence and a sense of safety and well being fairly quickly, but researchers believe that 5% to 20% of crime victims suffer from PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) as a result of their victimization. Such a reaction may result in depression, anger, disabling self-judgments, alienation from friends or from the world, or other upsetting reactions.



Common Physical Symptoms

Common short- and long-term physical symptoms of post trauma stress may include:

- Nausea
- Shortness of breath
- Headaches
- Skin rashes
- Lack of energy
- Weight loss or gain
- Hyperventilation
- Disturbed sleep patterns
- Rapid pulse



Mental and Emotional Responses

Mental and emotional responses may include:

- Embarrassment
- Feelings of guilt
- Intrusive thinking (mind-wandering, flashbacks to the event)
- Nightmares
- Mood swings (sudden and unprovoked fear, anger, crying irritability, giddiness)
- Difficulty concentrating
- Forgetfulness or memory lapses
- Difficulty showing emotion
- Inability to make decisions
- Disinterest in previously valued activities
- Exaggerated startle reflex



Coping with a Traumatic Event

Successfully coping with a traumatic event is primarily related to three factors:

- ▶ **The victim's perception of the type and severity of the event that disrupted his/her life.** How the victim puts the traumatic event into perspective is important. In an attempt to make sense of what happened, it is important that victims do not blame themselves. It is also important to understand that strong emotional reactions are common and normal immediately after the event. The feelings may be new and scary, but they will not last. However, that does not mean that there will not be ups and downs along the way to recovery. Time will heal – there is a light at the end of the tunnel.
- ▶ **The reactions of the people who are important to the victim.** Victims who have good coping skills and supportive family and friends are less vulnerable to long-lasting effects of post trauma stress. Such individuals are generally able to regain some feelings of confidence and normalness within a few weeks or months, although even they may experience occasional recurrences of post trauma stress symptoms.
- ▶ **The individual's past experience with trauma.** The more stable and "in control" other areas of the victim's life are, the better the prognosis for

discovering and developing a "new normal life" with the awareness and acceptance of the past event.

Tips for Recovery

There are several things that victims can do to assist themselves in their own recovery.

- ▶ **Remain in touch with friends and loved ones.** There sometimes is a tendency for victims to pull away from interactions with others. Often, friends or loved ones do not know what to say, and as a consequence, they either say nothing or say something to which the victim reacts negatively. It may seem to the victim that friends have abandoned him/her. The victim can help by telling friends what he/she needs from them; i.e., "I feel really uncomfortable with physical contact right now," "I appreciate it when you just hold me with out asking a lot of questions," or "I'd appreciate it if you would call me every day and just ask how I am doing."
- ▶ **Return to a regular routine as soon as possible.** When something terrifying or incomprehensible happens, the victim's immediate perception is that everything is dangerous and out of control and that he/she is never safe. Although these feelings are understandable, they almost certainly are faulty, having been distorted by the overwhelming nature of the event that took place. If the victim can maintain at least part of a normal routine, he/she can begin to dispel these faulty feelings. Little by little, by going to work, shopping, driving, eating, being with family members, or exercising, a more healthy and accurate perception of the life begins to redevelop. The victim begins to know that not all the world is dangerous and not everyone is out to get him/her. With these little successes, the victim slowly regains self-confidence and starts to regain "emotional equilibrium" or stability.
- ▶ **Find some "normal things" to do, even if they are different from the types of activity enjoyed prior to the traumatic event.** The victim may not want to participate in the relatively complicated human experiences such as going out for drinks, dating, or having sex. However, participating in more simple and routine activities like going to the mall, going out to eat with friends, going to church, or going to a movie may help reinforce a more realistic perception of the world. Victims may need a friend to act as a social coordinator for a few weeks to suggest and initiate some safe causal activities.

► **Get information about the case.** Even if there is not an identified suspect, talking with the police or detectives can help a victim begin to regain some sense of control. Sometimes information that is seemingly unimportant can be helpful to a police investigation.

If the suspect is identified and criminal charges are possible, the prosecutor and courts will be involved. Cooperation will be vital to successful prosecution.

The Victim Assistance staff can inform victims about who to talk with and can help contact the appropriate people. Many researchers have concluded that it is important to the recovery of the victim that he/she become positively involved with the police and prosecution.

If things do not seem to be getting better within a few weeks, a victim should consider seeking outside resources to support him/her and assist in recovery. A strong emotional response to a traumatic event is not abnormal. However, if the victim feels he/she is not healing or is still feeling overwhelmed by what happened, it may be good to at least consult with an experienced counselor who will be able to assess the severity of the symptoms, provide some feedback or suggestions and give appropriate directions.



Helping Victims Become Survivors

The staff of Glendale Victim Assistance specializes in helping crime victims deal with the emotional impact of their victimizations. This includes helping victims understand and overcome any post-traumatic stress reactions. For victims of other trauma, Victim Assistance can refer them to other appropriate helping professionals or organizations according to the specific needs.

Options for assistance include other victim assistance programs, employee assistance programs, mental health agencies, psychologists, counselors, psychologists, counselors, psychiatrists, or self-help organizations.

Many self-help organizations are specific to certain types of situations. Examples of local groups include: Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), Survivors of Suicide (SOS), The Compassionate Friends (for anyone who has lost a child through death), and Parents of Murdered Children (POMC). Other groups exist for rape victims, adults molested as children and for those who are grieving the death of a loved one.



Prepared by:
Glendale Victim Assistance
(623) 930-3030
6835 North 57th Dr.
Glendale, AZ 85301

In conjunction with:
Glendale City Court
(623) 930-2400
5711 W. Glendale Ave.
Glendale, AZ 85301

Glendale
City Prosecutor's Office
(623) 930-3475
6815 N. 57th Ave.
Glendale, AZ 85301



coping with traumatic events

City of Glendale
Victim Assistance
Self-Help Series

