

Understanding Crisis Reaction

Stress and Trauma

Your Day-to-Day Life

Individuals exist in a normal state of equilibrium. That equilibrium involves everyday stress: being late for work, getting a promotion, having a flat tire, getting ready for a date, putting children to bed. Occasionally, stress will be severe enough to move an individual out of the state of equilibrium, but most people stay in a familiar range of equilibrium.

When Trauma Occurs

Trauma throws people so far out of their range of equilibrium that is difficult for them to restore a sense of balance in life.

Trauma may be precipitated by “acute” or “chronic” stress. Acute stress is usually caused by a sudden, often random event. Chronic stress is one that occurs over and over again — each time pulling the individual toward the edge of his state of equilibrium, or beyond.

Most trauma comes from acute, unexpected stress like crime, natural disasters, accidents, acts of war. But some trauma is caused by quite predictable (but hated) stressors like chronic child, spouse, or elder abuse. “Developmental crises” come from the transitions in life, like adolescence, marriage, parenthood, and retirement.

Recovery from Acute Trauma

Most people live through a trauma and are to reconstruct their lives without outside help. Most people find some type of benign outside intervention useful in dealing with trauma.

Recovery from acute trauma is often affected by:

- ▶ Severity of crisis reaction
- ▶ Ability to understand in retrospect what happened
- ▶ Stability of victim/survivor equilibrium after event
- ▶ Supportive environment
- ▶ Validation of experience

Recovery issues for survivors include:

- ▶ Getting control of event in victim's/survivor's mind
- ▶ Working out an understanding of event and , as needed, a redefinition of values
- ▶ Re-establish a new equilibrium/life
- ▶ Re-establish trust
- ▶ Re-establish a future
- ▶ Re-establishing meaning

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Long-Term Crisis Reactions

Not all victims/survivors suffer from long-term stress reactions. Many victims may continue to re-experience crisis reactions over long periods of time. Such crisis reactions are normally in response to trigger events that remind the victim of the trauma.

Trigger Events will vary with different victims but may include:

- ▶ Identification of the assailant
- ▶ Seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, or tasting something that reminds one of the trauma experience
- ▶ “Anniversaries” of the event
- ▶ The proximity of holidays or significant “life events”
- ▶ Hearings, trials, appeals, or other critical phases of the criminal justice proceeding
- ▶ Media articles about similar events

Long-term stress or crisis reactions may be exacerbated or mitigated by the actions of others. When this happens, the actions of others are called the “second assault” and the feelings are often described as a “second jury.” Sources of the second assault may include:

- ▶ The criminal justice system
- ▶ The media
- ▶ Family, friends, or acquaintances
- ▶ Clergy
- ▶ Hospital and emergency-room personnel
- ▶ Health and mental health professionals
- ▶ Social services workers
- ▶ Schools or educations
- ▶ Victim compensation system

The intensity of long-term stress reaction usually decreases over time, as does the frequency of the re-experienced crisis. However, the effects of a catastrophic trauma cannot be “cured.” Even survivors of trauma who reconstruct new lives and have achieved a degree of normalcy and happiness in their lives will find that the new life will trigger the memories and reactions of the trauma in the future.