Disruptive Event Stress Management

It's common to experience temporary stress reactions after a disruptive event. These reactions may include anxiety or fear, avoidance of reminders, and unwanted thoughts or images of the incident. For most people, the reactions “fade” over a period of time. If they do not resolve, it is beneficial to seek the assistance of a professional with specialized training and expertise in resolving traumatic stress reactions; typically, the sooner, the better. The following are common strategies used to reduce reactions after a disruptive event.

**Recognize It:** Traumatic stress reactions are normal, and they will lessen over time. Individuals having reactions aren't having a nervous breakdown or “losing” their minds.

**Accept It:** This means, "don't try to make it go away." Notice physical and emotional reactions when they occur and “let them flow.” Reactions can become more difficult when a person believes the reactions will never go away. Relax and allow the reactions to be there and they will leave more quickly. The more one fights against these reactions, the more troublesome they can become.

**Practice Slow Breathing:** Breathe in deeply for a comfortable period (try up to four seconds), hold it for the same length, and exhale slowly. This slows breathing down. This strategy reduces chest tension, relaxes tight muscles and calms feelings of distress or anxiety. Deep breathing and relaxation will typically reduce the traumatic stress reactions about 30% over time.

**Allow Time to Pass:** Traumatic stress reactions come and go in “waves.” Although traumatic stress reactions can be initially strong, they typically weaken in time. The best response is to simply give it a little time and ride out the reaction using the three steps above. Ultimately, as one becomes skilled at using these steps, the frequency of traumatic stress reactions will also be significantly reduced or completely go away.

**Get Active:** Exercise also helps reduce the reactions and restore a sense of calm. Chemicals can build up in our bodies due to excessive stress. Tight muscles and feelings of anxiety are all improved by taking a daily walk. If it is hard getting started, set a goal that feels comfortable, like aiming for walking at least 30 minutes per day.

**Eat Well, Rest Well:** Under stress, eating and sleeping habits often change temporarily. Eat foods that are easy to digest in small portions. Disruptive sleep is very common. Stick with a set bedtime routine. Do activities that help you relax before bed. Minimize or avoid alcohol and caffeine during this time of increased stress.

Memorize these steps so you can use them when needed. Practice each step and enjoy the newfound ability to reduce reactions. As reactions decrease, one can start engaging in activities that may have been avoided since the incident. Action tends to reduce fear and discomfort. Engaging in activity and practicing these skills will get easier as they are repeated daily.

For a small number of people, traumatic stress reactions become distressing enough that professional help would be useful. The best results are found with treatment providers who specialize in treating traumatic stress reactions utilizing cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).

**Remember...** In a crisis, your confidential Health Advocate EAP+Work/Life program is available 24/7.