Taking Care of Yourself Following Civil Unrest

Civil unrest, such as riots, looting, or groups of upset people, can be an uncertain and frightening time. It can take a toll on your body and mind, even if you were not directly involved. Provided are some common reactions that you may experience during civil unrest, as well as some things to keep in mind and coping strategies to help you recover from this stressful event more quickly.

**Common Reactions:**
- **Shock**—feeling that this is “unreal”
- **Fear and anxiety**—over the safety of yourself, your co-workers, and your loved ones
- **Nightmares**—about possible scenarios or flashbacks of things you saw during the event
- **Trouble eating or sleeping**
- **Difficulty concentrating**, thinking clearly, or making decisions
- **Forgetfulness or absent-mindedness**
- **Feeling angry or on edge**
- **Hyperactivity or lethargy**—may feel like the pace of your daily activities is slower than usual—this usually diminishes once you get used to your normal routine again
- **Negativity**—you may have witnessed some of the worst of human behavior and feel more cynical about people as a result—this typically diminishes over time
- **Emotional Fatigue**—your ability to handle stress and emotions may be temporarily reduced
- **Extreme exhaustion**—even if you are getting enough sleep
- **Physical reactions**—such as stomach ache, headache, shakiness, or muscle tension

**Things to Keep in Mind:**
- **In situations of rioting or looting**, people may be experiencing emotional contagion, reducing their ability to think logically. Emotional contagion is when one person’s emotions “rub off” on those around them. Additionally, people have a tendency to conform to the behavior of those around them. Keeping this in mind may help you understand how people can behave worse in groups than they would individually.
- **There is no one right way to feel** after responding to high stress events like civil unrest. How people react depends on a variety of factors, including their previous experience with similar events, physical and mental health prior to the event, social supports and coping strategies, and religious beliefs.
- **Because our brain is trying to make sense of the high stress event**, it can slow down our recovery process if we try to deny our feelings or fight reactions. It may be helpful to realize that if flashbacks or dreams occur, it is a normal part of recovery and will usually diminish over time. If we are able to accept our reactions and not fight them, they typically go away faster.
- **Expect recovery.** With the help of social supports and coping skills most people begin to feel better within a few weeks. It takes time to recover, so be patient with yourself, but know that most people who experience a traumatic event do not develop post-traumatic stress disorder.
- **Avoid using alcohol or drugs to cope**, as they prevent your ability to work through the thoughts and emotions brought up by the stressful event. They also interfere with sleep, which makes it harder for your body to recover from stress.

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