Serene

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Body and mind after a distressing event

After experiencing a distressing event (for example an accident, sudden loss, threatening situation, violence, or being an eyewitness), a person may react in many different ways, both physically and psychologically. Strong reactions are normal. On the other hand, one may feel empty or feel nothing at all. This is often the mind's protective mechanism, especially immediately after the event. Below are described various common reactions following a distressing situation.

Mental symptoms, i.e. psychological reactions

- A sense of unreality immediately after the event; the situation may feel incomprehensible and distant
- Immediately after the event, during the shock phase, emotions may be completely absent
- Later, emotional experiences may become very intense
  - anxiety
  - sadness
  - fear
  - feelings of guilt
  - restlessness
  - difficulties with concentration and memory
  - recurrent mental images of the event
  - nightmares
  - irritability

Physical symptoms, i.e. physical reactions

- Trembling
- Sweating or chills
- Headache
- Palpitations
- Nausea
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Dizziness
- Loss of appetite
- Fatigue
- Sleep disturbances
- Shortness of breath
- Weakness

The physical and psychological reactions listed above are normal after a distressing and mentally demanding situation. However, if the symptoms persist for a long time or feel excessively distressing or intense, it is advisable to seek conversational support, for example through your local health care center or a crisis support center. These reactions are also typically fluctuating in nature – at times symptoms may be stronger, at other times milder. This does not mean that processing the event has stalled or is going backwards.

How can you help yourself?

- Talk about the event with friends and loved ones. Share your experiences, thoughts, and feelings. You may feel the need to go over the event again and again.
- Give yourself permission to cry if you feel like crying.
- Try to continue everyday routines and activities, and return to work/studies as soon as possible after the event.
- Also try to continue your hobbies; physical activity in particular is important for mental well-being.
- Make sure to get enough sleep, rest, and nourishment, even if you do not feel hungry.
- Do things you enjoy and that give you strength to cope.
- Avoid alcohol, other intoxicants, and sedative medications.