

# PREDICTABLE REACTIONS TO TRAUMA/RESILIENCE

## What are common reactions to a traumatic event, such as a violent act?

Traumatic events are shocking and emotionally overwhelming. No one who experiences or witnesses such an event is untouched by it. Feelings of intense fear, horror or helplessness are normal responses to abnormal events. Some potential reactions include the following:

- Becoming emotionally numb and/or unresponsive after the event
- Forgetting or blocking out certain aspects of the event
- Reliving the trauma in dreams with intrusive thoughts or imagery
- Avoiding potential reminders of the event
- Withdrawing from others; developing work or school problems
- Becoming easily frustrated or irritated over seemingly minor issues or becoming easily frightened by sudden sounds or people
- Developing physical symptoms, such as racing heartbeat, nausea, change in appetite, bodily aches and pains, fatigue, sweating, chills or insomnia

## How long do these reactions last?

Feelings of distress can develop at any time and are common within days of the traumatic event. More severe and/or persistent symptoms can occur weeks or months after the incident. Sometimes these feelings will reoccur on the anniversary of a traumatic event. *In general, individuals recover from trauma naturally over time.* However, some individuals, especially those who have prior exposure to traumatic events or who have psychiatric disorders,<sup>1</sup> may develop symptoms of acute stress disorder or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD occurs when traumatic experiences become internalized and cause persistent problems with mood, thoughts and behavior.

## What are some important ways to cope?

The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies recommends staying connected to natural support systems, whether they are friends, coworkers, family, neighbors, other familiar groups or community. Taking care of basic needs is important after trauma. This includes trying to get enough sleep, eating well, exercising, drinking enough water and avoiding excessive use of alcohol and caffeine. Keeping to routines and activities, if possible, and finding ways to assist someone else can be helpful. These activities help support resilience.

Knowing when to ask for help is also important. Warning signs include having problems with relationships, work or other important activities, or using alcohol or drugs to cope. A family doctor, member of the clergy, local mental health association or health insurer may be able to provide a referral to a counselor or therapist with experience in treating people affected by traumatic stress. Professional support groups may be helpful for victims, their families and friends.