

Understanding common reactions to a major event

Major events are occurring around the world with increasing frequency. When these events happen, we all respond and react in different ways. The impact can be significant, not only for those who are directly impacted, but also those who may be removed from the event itself. The explosion of reporting of events via social media can also mean it is difficult not to have constant reminders of the event on a 24/7 basis.

Reactions during major events

When a major event occurs, it is common to experience a range of emotions, behaviours and physical responses – these can be confusing and increase the distress being experienced because of the major event. Reactions will be different for everyone, but all are normal reactions to a frightening or unexpected situation.

During a major event, your body instinctively goes into survival mode that helps you cope with anxiety and fear and helps you deal with the unfolding event. This is both physically and emotionally draining – there are changes in the way many systems in your body operate including the nervous system, brain, blood circulation, and muscles. If you are feeling very alert and energised, able to manage the situation at hand and put your emotions aside, focusing on the needs of others and what is happening around you rather than yourself, feeling as though you need to be 'doing something' or have a keen awareness of basic human survival needs including rest, fluids and energy, you may be in a *state of stress*.

A *state of stress* helps you survive and will enable you to:

- ◆ Process information and respond quickly and clearly
- ◆ Focus on important tasks and information
- ◆ Concentrate or work on something for extended periods
- ◆ Not feel fatigue, hunger or thirst
- ◆ Completing tasks and ignoring emotions

Being in a *state of stress* can give you extra energy and help you survive during a major event, although it cannot be sustained for extended periods. Eventually you will start to feel the impact of the stress and will need to slow down and take steps to focus on your physical and psychological wellbeing.

Reactions to a major event

Everyone will experience and process major events differently however, there are some common responses. While these may feel confusing or unpleasant, all responses are normal when reacting to a traumatic event.

Some common reactions you might have include:

- ◆ Disbelief
- ◆ Confusion or disorientation
- ◆ Feeling numb
- ◆ Fear
- ◆ Anger
- ◆ Feeling overwhelmed
- ◆ Poor memory and decreased concentration
- ◆ Difficulty sleeping and nightmares, or sleeping too much
- ◆ Guilt
- ◆ Denial
- ◆ Difficulty breathing
- ◆ Social withdrawal
- ◆ Increased heart rate
- ◆ Sadness or grief
- ◆ Appetite changes
- ◆ Feeling sick including nausea, diarrhoea, constipation, shaking, dizziness
- ◆ Lack of interest in activities

Remember, all reactions to a major event are normal, and are in no way an indication of weakness. Usually reactions are more intense in the first week or two following a major event and will slowly dissipate, although for some people they could last for a longer period. If your reactions have a serious impact on your ability to function and participate in day to day activities, you should seek help and support.

Major events can cause physical, psychological and emotional distress. It is important to have a sense of control so your wellbeing can improve and feeling safe can help you start the process of recovering from the stress of the major event.

You may find it helpful to talk to others and allow them to help you recover – you may also need to speak and interact with organisations and services who will help you rebuild following the event. Make use of any resources that are made available to you through your friends and family, employer and wider community.