



AS A RESPONDER, I HAVE EXPERIENCED A POTENTIALLY TRAUMATIC EVENT

A potentially traumatic event is characterized by being directly confronted with death, the fear of dying, or when one's physical integrity or that of another person may have been threatened. This event happened suddenly, intensely, unpredictably, and uncontrollably. It provoked a strong reaction, a feeling of helplessness or horror. A potentially traumatic event can occur during an accident, a violent act, or a disaster, to name just a few examples.

This fact sheet is an information tool for responders* who have experienced a potentially traumatic event, particularly a disaster. It presents the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, ideas for taking care of yourself, and how to identify a need for help from the available services.

Frequent reactions in people faced with a disaster

Refer to the fact sheets
A disaster has occurred
or
Coping with a potentially traumatic event

Particularities in responders

When a disaster occurs, firefighters, police officers, ambulance technicians, first responders, rescuers, and investigators may be exposed to scenes of a highly traumatic nature.

Moreover, for psychosocial workers, volunteers, managers, and other responders, the fact that they are regularly involved and in close contact with disaster victims, their families, and the population concerned, may further expose them to the impacts of the event.

In the course of their respective duties, responders must be rational and efficient despite a chaotic context. Here are some examples of situations that may arise:

- strong physical and cognitive activation;
- speed of response;
- confrontation with victims' injuries, death, or human remains;
- execution of techniques appropriate to the situation;
- impression of operating on "autopilot";
- narrowing of the perceptual field (tunnel vision);
- psychomotor numbness where stress is hardly perceived;
- confrontation with the limits of the response in relation to the "expectations" of the victims and their relatives, as well as colleagues, partners, authorities, and society in general;
- desolation and guilt at not being able to do more.

The adaptability of responders in such situations is remarkable. However, it should not be forgotten that they are exposed to the same potentially traumatic scenes. In this sense, despite their training, they are just as likely to experience the same reactions as disaster victims and even to develop post-traumatic stress disorder.

* The term "responder" is used here to refer to anyone involved in any way in helping disaster victims. They may be responders from health and social services, emergency services, civil security, manual workers, managers, volunteers, municipal council members, or informal caregivers.

What is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

Post-traumatic stress disorder is defined as a high level of anxiety, characterized by a feeling of intense fear, which can appear following a traumatic event.¹

The physical and psychological symptoms described below may appear quickly or several weeks or even months after being confronted, directly or indirectly, with a potentially traumatic event. In the case of PTSD, these symptoms, instead of resolving, become chronic and are felt with the same intensity as upon first exposure to the traumatic situation. It is estimated that one in ten people who have been confronted with a potentially traumatic event will develop post-traumatic stress disorder.

1. Gouvernement du Québec, État de stress post-traumatique (ESPT), repéré le 5 novembre 2024 à <https://www.quebec.ca/sante/sante-mentale/s-informer-sur-sante-mentale-et-troubles-mentaux/mieux-comprendre-troubles-mentaux/etat-stress-post-traumatique>

Symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder

People who develop post-traumatic stress disorder may exhibit the following symptoms:

Intrusions: People are inundated by images, sounds, smells, and emotions that remind them of the event (flashback). They may also have nightmares and continually feel as though they are reliving the event or that it will happen again.

Avoidance: People continually try, consciously or unconsciously, to avoid anything that might remind them of the event. It is difficult for them to talk about the event, and they make efforts to avoid painful memories of the event.

Physical symptoms and hypervigilance: People may experience headaches and other physical pain, sleep problems, tremors, fatigue, gastrointestinal problems, anger, restlessness, difficulty paying attention and concentrating, etc. People are constantly on alert and easily startled despite the absence of danger.

People may also have difficulty remembering important aspects of the event. People may experience guilt, strong emotions, and diminished interest in the activities they used to do before the disaster. They may also feel detached from their loved ones and exhibit a negative mood.

In addition, other symptoms (anxiety, panic attacks, depression, depressive symptoms, abuse of alcohol, drugs, or medication, etc.) may also be associated with post-traumatic stress disorder.

The intensity of these reactions over a long period of time can gradually lead people to become exhausted and feel increasingly depressed. This suffering can lead to significant difficulties in functioning at home and at work.

If these symptoms persist, it is important to consult a health and social services professional in order to properly assess your situation and receive the appropriate services.

How to take care of yourself

There are some things that can be done to help cope with a similar event that can be identified and incorporated into your daily life. They are numerous and often within easy reach.

- Accept how you have reacted since the event. Tell yourself that your symptoms are normal in the face of such a situation.
- Don't be alone. Talk about your experience with someone you trust. Repressing your emotions will only postpone the problems until later. Don't hesitate to express your expectations and needs to those around you.
- As soon as possible and according to your abilities, resume your usual activities. Maintain your daily routine. Keep pursuing your hobbies. Exercise can be beneficial.
- Don't avoid people, places, or situations that remind you of the event. This avoidance will only postpone the problems until later.
- Don't let your everyday difficulties pile up. Take one problem at a time and work through it. Accept that you can't control everything.
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs. Although it may seem to help at first, overuse of these products could make your symptoms worse.
- Learn about post-traumatic stress disorder from reliable and reputable sources of information. This will help you better understand your situation.
- Whenever possible, participate in support activities offered by your organization.



When is it necessary to ask for help?

Most people who are exposed to a potentially traumatic event will have their symptoms disappear within the first month. For some, however, these symptoms will persist for a longer period of time (several months or even years after the event).

When it becomes difficult to function normally in family and marital relationships or at work, it is advisable to consult a qualified service.

It is important to remember that anyone can feel the impacts of a potentially traumatic event. Despite their level of preparation, responders are not completely immune to the effects that this type of event can have on their physical and psychological health.

Available services

At any time, it is possible to seek help from a health and social services professional.

- › Info-Social 811
- › Family medicine group (MFG)
- › Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
- › Suicide Prevention:
1-866-APPELLE (277-3553)

Information is also available at the following links:

- › Getting better following a disaster
www.quebec.ca/en/public-safety-emergencies/emergency-situations-disasters-and-natural-hazards/getting-better-following-disaster
- › Trauma Studies Center
trauma.criusmm.net/en/
- › Urgence Québec
www.quebec.ca/en/public-safety-emergencies