

## Acute Stress

By: Lynda Savage, M.S., LMFT, LPC

Stress has been called the physiological reaction of fight or flight. The body perceives a stressor and then releases a complex set of hormones designed to cause fight or flight in the body. Stress is not only caused by a bear suddenly coming out of the woods, but also by excessive demands in daily life. It happens even in overhearing an argument. Excessive demands in daily living in the Western culture most certainly cause stress.

Many people say: "So what's the big deal?" The big deal is that over time this complex set of hormones, continually triggered, begins to break the body down. In the case of Acute Stress, the person being affected may have consequences physically and psychologically that last for years.

What is Acute Stress?

Acute stress is the initial concentrated exposure to a traumatic event or events. Acute stressors might be a war, being robbed, experiencing excessive cruelty, a natural disaster, viewing human mutilation, etc. What happens to our bodies in acute stress is that the unexpected events interrupt what we experience as normal. We go into the experience feeling safe. After being exposed to trauma, we do not feel safe.

Reactions to not feeling safe after the acute stress may include anxiety, sleeplessness, flashbacks, confusion, crying suddenly, eating problems, inability to carry on life's activities or numbness. A person may experience some or all of these. These reactions may not occur immediately.

For the Christian, the reactions to acute stress may seem "ungodly." It is our belief that these reactions are our God given mechanism by which we cope. Healing can be a process. Jacob became Israel over time, not over night. Healing as a process is as much a blessing from God as is immediate healing.

Initial Responses

Acute stress begins when the actual event occurs (and sometimes reoccurs). The first response is a sense that this cannot be really happening or "I must be dreaming." What follows may be an acceptance that what is happening is real but moves toward what Everstine calls Cognitive Survival State. In this state the individual pulls together all of their resources in order to stay alive or do what is immediately called for. In some cases people have a sense that everything is moving in slow motion. It is also common that sound or physical sensation is muted. At this early state, we believe God has created the mind to protect itself with these reactions. Chemicals may be flowing in the body to the extent that cars may be lifted by one person or other super human feats may be done. God

in his mercy has created us with these abilities or mechanisms in order for us to act, stabilize, and recover.

### Stabilization Phase

Once the initial event is over, one enters a stabilization phase where there is a certain amount of what might be called: "automatic pilot." In other words, the person is taking action but is in a state of shock. Frequently the person moves into taking care of others or evaluating injuries or needs of those around them. The body is both in denial and entering what is real around it. A person is coping by putting their personal needs on hold while taking appropriate action. An important factor to remember when you find yourself in the stabilization phase is that it is normal to vacillate between the shock of what has happened and emotions in reaction to the event.

An important part of the stabilization phase is to debrief as soon after the event as possible. This means to talk about what happened as soon as you can. One may need to do this many times. Debriefing helps to move through the experience of shock and denial to the realness of what has happened. As a person debriefs, and experiences are heard and validated, a sense of "I am normal to be feeling these things" begins to settle in. It is normal, for example, to be shaken by these events. To be crying while talking about these things, for example, is a God given response. Each response in debriefing is individual.

If you do not debrief after trauma, it is likely that you may get emotionally/spiritually stuck. One of the ways some people get stuck is to dissociate themselves from the stressful event(s). We believe the Lord will prompt you to debrief. Sometimes emotional/physical symptoms prompt us to debrief or deal with unresolved trauma. Symptoms have a part in healing as a way of calling attention to your need to pour out your experience again to Him and perhaps others, for further healing. Remember, symptoms can be a God given part of healing.

People respond differently, even in the way they talk about an event. It is important not to challenge another persons' experience by way of saying, "...no it didn't happen that way, it happened this way..." Remember each person describing the event is viewing it from a very personal perspective. People describing their experience need loving acceptance in their descriptions. People may already feel as if they are losing their minds so "correcting" them is never in order at this phase. Remember, the enemy of our souls wants us to feel ashamed not only for experiencing these or any other traumatic events, but also to feel ashamed for our reactions to them. The devil is a liar to imply that we are terrible for experiencing terrible events. The reactions we are describing are normal and God given. Jesus has come to heal the broken hearted, and He will heal as we come to Him.

### The Healing Process

After the stabilization phase comes a longer process of healing. It is here one may experience mild to severe depression, anger, hurt, mood swings, anxiety, loss of interest in daily activities and a change in eating habits. Depending on the event, symptoms can last for days, months, or even years. The earlier these are addressed the better. Sometimes in this phase there is a lot of rehearsing of what happened and philosophizing about the event. This is an excellent time to seriously bring the event and all of yourself to the Lord in prayer. Remember, God is gentle with us and walks with us through each experience. One may need to go again and again to the Lord with issues pertaining to the event.

If depression lingers or everyday activities are commonly interrupted with reactions to the event, it is important to seek professional help, preferably from a Christian resource familiar with trauma recovery and biblical principles.

As therapists we are constantly impressed with God's ability to heal and love those affected persons to wholeness. We are also constantly impressed with the strength and resilience God has given people. It is important to note that a person is not the same person after acute trauma. Godly men and women often suffer trauma all over the world. Strength comes from His comfort and healing, as does an increase in faith and purpose. If you are reading this and it is "not over for you," do not despair, God is the God of process. He will never leave or forsake you.

*Compliments of Practical Family Living, Inc.  
P.O. Box 1676, Appleton, WI 54912 (920) 720-8920*

*You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute our articles in any format provided that you credit the author, no modifications are made, you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, and you include Practical Family Living's web-site address (<http://www.pfl.org>) on the copied resource. Quotations from any article are also permitted with credit to the author and citing the web-site. Any use of other materials on this web-site, including reproduction, modification, distribution or republication, without the prior written consent of Practical Family Living, Inc., is strictly prohibited.*