

Understanding Post-Traumatic Stress

...and other helpful information from the SPU Counseling Center and the SPU People Response Team

(Based in part on content from "Psychological First Aid" ©2006 National Child Traumatic Stress Network and National Center for PTSD)

You Are Not Alone

Returning to SPU a few months following the shocking and tragic event of June 5 will be stressful for most students. It is important to remember that you are not alone, and the entire SPU community can be thought of as a "healing community." You are part of this healing community.

In the days following June 5, we all rejoiced to discover that SPU is even more of a caring and supportive place than we had realized before. We can now take this awareness of who we are a step further and help each other learn to live with June 5 as one part of our shared story.

Stress Is Normal

People, places, and things are likely to remind us of what happened on our campus, and stress will increase as a result. This is normal. Some of you may be back to yourself since being away for the summer, and you'll be fine when you return. You may be able to be there for those who are still struggling. Others may have experienced intense stress in June and through the summer, but you began to function better as the summer progressed. Now you are finding that some of the stress is returning now that you're back. With support and healthy coping responses, your system will once again settle and you will return to full stability.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Research tells us that when people are exposed to a traumatic event, 70% return to stability. This means that approximately 30% of those who were most directly connected to the scene of the shooting or connected to the people involved in the tragedy may experience some form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Others may be experiencing PTSD symptoms because the June 5 trauma activated prior life traumas, resulting in there being more to cope with. If you or others in your life are experiencing PTSD symptoms, it is important to know that this is also a normal human reaction to an abnormal event. This is *not* a sign of moral weakness or failure, but demonstrates how being exposed to trauma can affect our entire system. It is VERY IMPORTANT to know that PTSD is *very* responsive to treatment. There is not only *hope*, but there are proven ways for any survivor now experiencing PTSD symptoms to get better and for this level of intense stress to be resolved.

Signs and Symptoms of PTSD

The following are the signs and symptoms of PTSD. To meet the definition, they must persist for a month or longer. In determining whether a person is dealing with PTSD, some aspect of all five areas below must be present:

- 1) **Stressor:** being exposed to a traumatic event directly or indirectly.
- 2) **Re-Experiencing or Re-Living the Trauma:** such as having flashbacks, nightmares, or becoming very upset when reminded of the trauma.
- 3) **Avoidance:** staying away from places or people that remind you of the trauma, isolating from others, and/or feeling emotionally numb.
- 4) **Arousal and Reactivity:** such as an exaggerated startle response, hypervigilance (preoccupied with detecting threats), with related anxiety and irritability, problems concentrating, difficulty sleeping.
- 5) **Negative Changes in Thinking and Mood:** common examples include not remembering details of the traumatic event; distorted negative beliefs about oneself or the world ("I am bad" or "The world is a completely unsafe place"); distorted blame (self or others) for causing the traumatic event, the aftermath, or the response; an inability to experience positive emotions; intense fear, sadness, or anger, or feeling alienated from others.

⇒ The most important thing to keep in mind about PTSD is that it often disrupts a person's life to the point that it is not possible to function well. What a person with PTSD was once able to do, they are no longer capable of doing. Once a traumatic event results in PTSD that lasts several months or longer, it seldom goes away on its own. Counseling provided by a professional who has special training in treating trauma and/or medication prescribed by a qualified medical provider is needed to manage and resolve the traumatic symptoms.

Support and Professional Assistance

If you or someone you know or care-for seems to be struggling with PTSD, support and professional help is available all around you:

- ✧ Students living in campus housing may wish to initially talk with their **RA, SMC, or RLC**.
- ✧ Campus pastors in **University Ministries** are available to meet with students, staff, or faculty. (206) 281-2966 um@spu.edu
- ✧ Staff members in the **Office of Student Life** are available to meet with students. Contact Student Life: (206) 281-2481 spu.edu/studentlife
- ✧ The SPU **Student Counseling Center** offers a wide range of services at no cost to current undergraduate students. Professional therapists are available for individual and group counseling, consultation, and referral to other service providers in the Seattle area. The SCC also maintains a website of mental-health and community service providers at spu.edu/depts/scc/resources.asp. A new up-to-date list of those counselors in the community offering a reduced rate to SPU students has been added to the SCC website. To qualify for this special rate, you must be a current or past SPU student who wants help with the stress and/or trauma related to the June 5 incident. Contact the SPU Counseling Center: (206) 281-2657 scc@spu.edu.
- ✧ Staff and faculty members in crisis can talk to their **supervisor, department chair, or dean**.
- ✧ Most SPU employees have access to counseling and other crisis support benefits through the Employee Assistance Program, managed by the **Office of Human Resources**. Contact Human Resources: (206) 281-2809 spu.edu/depts/hr/benefits/EAP.htm

General Tips for Coping with Stress

- Remind yourself that stress in its many forms comes with life. Learning to cope with stress is an important life skill.
- Focus on one practical way that you can manage your current stress right now. Think about how you have successfully managed stress in the past – what has worked for you?
- Spend time talking with a trusted friend, family member, mentor, pastor, or spiritual leader.
- Spend time in prayer.
- Engage in pleasant and distracting activities such as sports, hobbies, or reading
- Make a commitment to your health that includes adequate rest, healthy foods, and moderate exercise.
- Use relaxation methods like breathing exercises, meditation, calming self-talk, and music.
- Use a journal to record your thoughts and feelings.
- Consult with a medical provider about medical issues you are experiencing.
- Talk with a professional counselor, or participate in a support group.

Things to Avoid When Stressed

- Using alcohol or drugs to cope.
- Violence, conflict, or blaming others.
- Extreme withdrawal from family and friends.
- Not taking care of yourself.
- Overeating, or failing to eat.
- Excessive TV or video games.
- Working too much.
- Withdrawing from pleasant activities.
- Worrying too much about being a burden to others, or thinking they don't care.
- Extreme avoidance of all thoughts or talk about the event or death of a loved one.
- Doing risky things (driving recklessly, substance abuse, not taking normal precautions).
- Waiting until you are too stressed or exhausted to benefit from the help of others.

Giving Support to Others Affected by Stress or Trauma

- Understand that some people may need to talk, and some may just need a calm presence.
- Find a quiet and uninterrupted place to talk, and give them your attention.
- Pay close attention to the specific needs of this person – ask them what would be helpful.
- Listen to what they are experiencing, and help show them that their response is normal given what they have been through.
- Acknowledge that this type of stress takes time to resolve – it is not a quick fix.
- Acknowledge the pain that they are experiencing, without rushing to say that it will all be OK.
- Avoid giving advice from your own personal experiences without understanding their story.
- Talk through the steps they can take to better cope with their stress and help them make a plan.
- Enlist the help of others in your social circle so that you all take part in supporting this person.
- Let them know that avoiding or withdrawing can increase overall distress.
- If they agree, pray with them or enlist others to pray for them with you.
- Encourage them to seek professional support from a counselor, clergy, or medical provider, and offer to accompany them. If their problems persist and if their stress seems to look like PTSD, strongly encourage them to seek professional counseling support.
- Remember that a loving, accepting, and supportive community makes all the difference for us as we deal with hard, emotional times. Be a part of our healing community. You can make a difference.