

## SECTION 2: PSYCHOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO TRAUMATIC STRESSORS

The following is a fictional account, but is representative of psychological response to a traumatic event.

*"It was the last day of August when the sunset took on an eerie gloom. As I sat in my office on the fifth floor of the island's largest commercial bank trying to complete another day's chores, the building seemed to shake. But why? As I stopped to think about it, the shaking became more and more pronounced until finally amidst screams coming from everywhere I heard a loud crash.*

*"Where am I? What is happening? I can't see very well but there is a stench pervading the air and I can't hear anyone no matter how hard I listen. There is a large object on my left leg and a heavy piece of concrete on my chest. It is very difficult to breathe and words fail me to describe the pain that I am feeling. How long have I been here? I feel weak and unable to move. Surely, death can't be far away!*

*"It is now two months since I have been in hospital recovering from my injuries. Despite the loss of my left leg, it is a miracle that anyone found me and that I was still alive. My relatives are grateful to the rescue workers and the nurses and doctors for saving my life but over the past few weeks I pray to die since life tortures me mercilessly.*

*"My mood keeps fluctuating and at times I become intensely anxious with bouts of sweating, palpitations, hyperventilation, screaming and hostility. At other times, I feel lost and empty. I can't get rid of the horrifying memories and the vivid images that remain in my mind. These memories, some of which are very patchy, seem to haunt me all the time and I become very distressed whenever anything—a sound, a smell or a sight—remind me of my ordeal. I dislike talking about my experiences and avoid anything that reminds me of them. In addition, I feel very guilty that I have survived and so many of my work colleagues died in the incident.*



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*"I have only been recently weaned off the ventilator and yesterday Dr. Browne, a psychiatrist, visited me for the first time. He thinks that I'm suffering with that PTSD thing and he has started me on medication and assured me that I'll be better. Well, I've heard him but how can I really believe him? He can't possibly understand what is happening to me!"*

## **What is a traumatic stressor?**

Any event which is outside of the realm of normal human experience and very distressing is a traumatic stressor or critical incident. Such events usually involve a perceived threat to the physical integrity of the individual and evoke reactions of intense fear, horror and/or helplessness. *It should be noted, nonetheless, that tragedies have frequently been the source of new ideas, discoveries and technologies.*

Examples of traumatic stressors include:

- Line of duty injury or death,
- Injury or death of children,
- Serious automobile accidents,
- Fires,
- Floods,
- Hurricanes,
- Mud slides,
- Volcanic eruptions,
- Earthquakes,
- Major explosions.



## What is psychotraumatology?

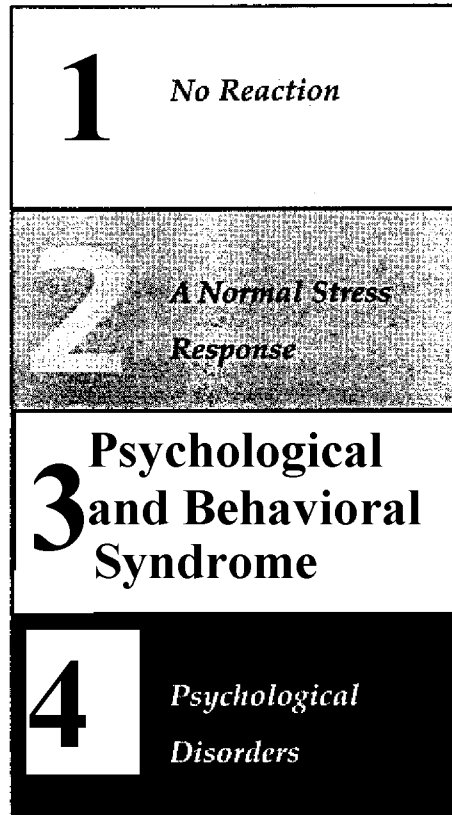
Psychotraumatology refers to the study of psychological trauma. Four major influences can be identified as having set the foundation for this field; they are disaster psychology, the psychology of violence and war, law enforcement psychology and the occupational health considerations of persons who routinely work in traumatic situations.

## Who are the potential victims of a traumatic stressor?

Depending on the type of exposure to a traumatic event, we can classify potential victims into three categories:

<b>Primary Victims</b>	Those individuals most directly affected by the event, e.g., the persons whose houses are blown down in a hurricane.
<b>2 Secondary Victims</b>	Those individuals who in some way observe the consequences of the traumatic event on the primary victims, e.g., bystanders, rescuers and emergency response personnel.
<b>Tertiary Victims</b>	Those individuals who are indirectly affected by the traumatic event as a result of later exposure to the scene of the trauma or to the primary or secondary victims of the trauma, e.g., family members of primary or secondary victims or passers by.

**What are some of the possible psychological and behavioral responses of persons after they have been exposed to a traumatic situation?**



Exposure to any serious event can have negative short- or long-term consequences which may include deterioration in one's physical and/or psychological well-being, impaired social and occupational functioning, relationship breakdowns, and attempted and successful suicides.

The possible range of reactions are very complex and they vary enormously in severity and type. They are also very dependent on the individual affected. Such reactions range from negative feelings to psychiatric disorders and they pass through a series of phases. One third of those exposed to a traumatic stressor experience little or no distress, one third experience moderate distress and the remaining one third have severe distress. Such reactions may be immediate or delayed and other stressors in one's life may influence this process.

*It should be noted that there are persons who, when exposed to traumatic stressors like a natural disaster may experience distress but retain their ability to objectively appraise the situation and decide how to manage it. Such persons tend to lead and console others and organize rescues.*