HANDOUT 2: SYMPTOMS OF POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can occur after someone has experienced a traumatic event such as a disaster. You may be coping with some of the symptoms of PTSD. People with PTSD have 4 different types of symptoms: intrusive symptoms, avoidance symptoms, negative changes in thoughts and feelings, and arousal symptoms. You will find basic information about each symptom type below, as well as some basic strategies for coping with these symptoms.

INTRUSIVE SYMPTOMS

After a disaster, it is common for people to **re-experience** the event in several ways. You may have intense, **unwanted memories** of the disaster that seem to come out of the blue, and you may be unable to get rid of them (e.g., thinking about where you when the event occurred). Sometimes a reminder of the event triggers these experiences. These **triggers** can be external reminders (e.g., seeing a familiar landmark where the disaster occurred), or they can be internal reminders (e.g., feeling afraid, helpless, etc.).

Flashbacks are particularly vivid and intrusive memories that momentarily make it seem like the disaster is happening again. Intrusive symptoms such as unwanted memories or flashbacks often cause **bodily reactions** like a racing heart, sweating, shaking, or shortness of breath. Another common symptom is **nightmares**, which may or may not be related to the disaster, but nevertheless usually feel uncontrollable and unpredictable, much like the disaster itself.

AVOIDANCE SYMPTOMS

Another common PTSD symptom is **avoidance** of anything that reminds you of the disaster, such as similar **situations**, as well as **thoughts**, **feelings**, and **memories** related to the disaster. Avoiding things that remind you of the disaster usually brings some temporary relief in distress. However, you may find that your avoidance starts to expand to include many other places/situations that are less directly related to the disaster. When this occurs, the avoidance can begin to get in the way of your everyday life and functioning, including your ability to enjoy things you used to enjoy doing, spending time with friends and loved ones, and fulfilling obligations such as being a parent and working. In addition, the more you avoid doing things that remind you of the disaster, the less safe you feel, which can make you feel even more distressed.

NEGATIVE CHANGES IN THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS

Feeling bad about yourself and the world is common after a disaster. This may include feeling intense fear, horror, anger, guilt or shame. You may blame yourself or others for the traumatic event. Sometimes the painful thoughts or feelings can be so intense that your mind just blocks them out altogether and you **may not remember** parts of what happened. Feelings of **numbness** or emptiness, in which you find it difficult to experience positive emotions (e.g., pleasant or loving feelings) may also occur. You may feel **distant or detached** from other people, even people you love. You may **lose interest** in activities you used to enjoy. These negative feelings,

detachment from others, and loss of interest after a disaster can make it difficult to get the support you need from others, and contribute to feelings of depression, withdrawal, and social isolation.

AROUSAL SYMPTOMS

Another common reaction to a disaster, which is related to fear/anxiety, is being **overly aroused**. This includes feeling **keyed up** and **jumpy**, being **easily startled**, feeling **overly watchful and on edge**, being **irritable** or prone to **anger outbursts,** and having **trouble sleeping or concentrating**. When faced with a sudden, unexpected traumatic experience like a disaster it is normal to respond with a "fight, flight, or freeze" response. As a result of your experience, you know there is danger in the world and you want to be ready for it. However, having your body in a constant state of arousal takes a great toll on you and can interfere with your day-to-day life. It can also be confusing to have your body constantly sending you messages that you are in danger when actually you are safe.

MANAGING POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS REACTIONS

Over the next few weeks, you will learn strategies to cope with your PTSD reactions and overcome them. In the meantime, here are a few tips for dealing with some of the symptoms described above.

- Try not to avoid people or places that remind you of your traumatic experiences. Although avoidance may reduce distress in the short term, it usually backfires and causes more problems in the long term. Talk to your therapist, close friends, or family about ideas regarding how to gradually approach situations that you have been avoiding but which are objectively safe. Sometimes having a friend or "coach" accompany you in the beginning can be helpful.

- Try to allow yourself to experience some of your upsetting memories of the disaster without immediately putting them out of your mind. Although your memories may be distressing, they can't hurt you, and the more you get used to them the less distressing they will feel. Try using relaxation or mindfulness techniques to help you tolerate and manage you upsetting memories as much as you can.

- Try to keep active and schedule positive activities in your day. This might include activities that you enjoy but don't do enough of, such as taking a bath, taking time (even 10 minutes) for yourself, getting a massage, reading a book, or going for a walk. You will learn more about scheduling activities in this treatment program.