



# Psychological Shock

2 February 2014

## **Hello**

I sincerely hope that 2014 has gotten off to a good start. And if it hasn't then now is the time to commit to making this a great year. A great year is not necessarily one in which wonderful things happen to you; it is a year when you sow lots of seeds that will produce the fruit you want in your life. So stop waiting, get planning, and take those action steps to move yourself forward.

In this newsletter I am going to continue talking about the phases of personal change. The first one is often categorised as shock and denial. Below I am going to talk about psychological shock. In the next newsletter I am going to talk about denial because they are different; they present differently, and benefit from different interventions.

## **Psychological Shock: What it looks like**

Following the communication of something frightening and/or highly unexpected, going into shock means our minds go numb - they freeze. What is happening around us is too much to comprehend. And so we shut it out. We stop feeling, we stop thinking, and if we have to do any physical activities we do them in a daze. Anything we do, we do on automatic. This is the time when people say things like, "I don't know how I walked to the office." "I don't know how I drove home." If the shock is bad, you may not even feel like you are in your own body. During shock most people don't feel like eating or drinking anything. They usually can't read or do any work. They mostly can just sit or stand and look in front of them dazed. Because emotions also get damped down, people can hurt themselves badly in shock and not feel anything. This can be a terribly difficult time for the person in shock as well as those around them.

You can experience shock even if the change is not that unexpected. For example, even if you know you are not well, a confirmed diagnosis of cancer can still be overwhelming. If you know there is restructuring going on at work, finally hearing you have lost your job can still send you into a state of numbing disbelief. How we hear about a change, who we hear it from, and how it is put across has a very big impact on how we experience the rest of the change.

When you are experiencing shock you may not want to talk to people or participate in activities with others, and you will find it difficult to speak as normal and carry on with your usual daily activities. You may feel like you are a walking robot. Being in shock serves a purpose. It is the way in which our bodies and minds deal with what is happening. We block out the feelings because it is just too overwhelming. We would fall apart were we to actually feel all the emotions going on inside of us.

In a state of shock or disbelief, as in any state, the worst thing you can do is to try and fight it. All fighting does is give your current state more energy and so make it stronger. Accept what is going on, as hard as this may be to do. You can't and shouldn't snap out of it as some people will ask you to do. Your mind has experienced something it cannot quite process at this time. That is why it has shut down. It serves a protective function. Let it protect you. You will come out of it and things will go back to being okay. But for now just accept the way things are.

Don't judge yourself. The way you are acting is the best way your body and mind knows to deal with the change. It is part of our inbuilt mechanisms for survival. If you did not go into shock you would be overcome and your mind would literally breakdown. When you are able to process and make sense of what is happening you will do so. There is nothing right or wrong about being in shock.

## **Self-help actions:**

- If you have any urgent or pressing engagements cancel them or postpone them or get someone else to go along in your place. You will not be able to focus on anything. If you need to make decisions you could end up making some very poor ones.

- Get yourself into a safe space - preferably your home. You will find it difficult to concentrate and focus so if you can avoid work for a few days then do so. Driving around is not good either.
- Some people, when they are in shock, avoid company, while others have a need to be surrounded by people. Still others don't want to talk or take part in activities, but experience comfort having someone around. Being alone for a long time may actually not be a good thing if you are in shock. It can lead into depression - and a human presence can be very comforting. Human contact and having other people around can be very good, even if you don't talk.
- At this time you may not feel like discussing the details of what happened or solutions or next steps. This is fine - when you are in shock you are not capable of looking at next steps. You just need to get through this stage - which is getting your mind to accept what it has heard.
- If you are physically fragile or sick and you receive news of a big change in your life, you may need to have someone with you to make sure you don't become seriously ill during this time of shock. A physically stronger body is better able to withstand emotional shock. If you are frail then a psychological shock can affect your physical health as well as your mental health.
- Sometimes people who are giving you bad news, be it a medical practitioner who is informing you of a serious illness or a manager who is telling you that you have lost your job, give you loads of information at the same time as they inform you of the change. When you are in shock you will not take in nor remember all this information. Your brain is still trying to come to terms with what it heard right in the beginning of the conversation. Always insist on a further opportunity to talk to the person relaying the information at a later time when you are less shocked. If they insist you hear it all now, then challenge the person. They are being unfair. Only once there is a level of calm restored to your mind can you take in information adequately and make appropriate and best decisions for yourself.
- If you want to you can always ask a trusted friend or relative to accompany you to a meeting if you think you may hear bad news. In addition to providing emotional support the friend or relative can ask questions and take contact details for follow up discussions.
- When you are in shock it is not advisable to make big decisions. Some people who are traumatised make huge decisions overnight - such as selling their house, or resigning on the spot. Give yourself some time to think through any major decisions and talk them through with a trusted person who is supportive of you before you undertake anything too radical.
- In shock focus on your breathing. Although you may feel a desperate urge to reach for alcohol or even stronger stuff, do not. Find other ways to calm down.
- When you are in shock you need to be good to yourself. You need to engage in nurturing activities and spend time with understanding and supportive people. You do not need to set yourself on a path to destruction and damage. For many people, in their subconscious is a niggling feeling that says, "Did I deserve this?" "What did I do to bring this on?" And they may get angry with themselves. Don't do this.



*"The most important thing to remember is this: To be ready at any moment to give up what you are for what you might become." ~ W E du Bois*

Some people will come through shock quite quickly. In fact the next day they may be fine. If you are not one of them, and you are struggling through this phase after weeks of being in shock, you should consider consulting a professional. Hopefully we have reached a time in our society when no one is embarrassed about consulting a mental health practitioner. Anyone who can help you live a better, more productive, and happier life, can only be good for you. A time of shock is not a time to be judgemental about yourself and come down hard on yourself - it is a time to take care and make sure you do the best for yourself and your future.

Wishing you a wonderful calm February.

*Penny*