

## Jury Duty and Stress

### Why is jury duty always stressful to some degree?

Under the best of circumstances, jury duty causes stress to the citizens fulfilling that civic responsibility. It disrupts the normal flow of your life and may force you to neglect family or professional obligations over the course of the trial. Even as you focus on your role in the criminal process, you may be aware of other tasks piling up in your lives outside the courtroom.

In addition, you are required to spend long periods of time interacting with a group of peers not of your own choosing. Invariably, differences of opinion, values, or interpersonal style arise which can make the ongoing contact tense or awkward.

Finally, as jurors, you are instructed to share no aspect of the case with each other or with friends or loved ones outside. Even as the case takes up the bulk of your time and waking thought, you are not allowed to vent, examine, or review those thoughts with the most important people in your life.

### Why is duty on high profile cases or violent crimes especially stressful?

As an alleged offense becomes more serious, jurors feel a greater burden in making that decision, not only for the impact it has on the people involved but also from a sense of responsibility to the larger community. Often in cases involving violence, the jury is exposed to images and stories which go beyond normal experience. Just as police officers and firefighters may become haunted by scenes of suffering or horror to which they respond, so can jurors be unsettled by the graphic reenactment or exposure to a crime.

Ironically, even as you feel the pressure and power of these cases, you are simultaneously told to abandon stress management techniques which have served you in the past. You are precluded from sharing specifics of the case with those upon whom you have relied before for support. Rather than venting and releasing your outrage and anxiety, you have been encouraged to suppress your emotional reaction to maintain objective neutrality. While we all tend to make sense of our world through identifying with the people around us, you have come to realize that there are dangers in identifying too strongly with a victim or, perhaps, with a defendant.

Finally, the stress of a difficult case can be compounded simply by knowing that you were imperfect in holding your tongue, emotions, or perspective always in check.

### What are some common stress reactions?

#### **Cognitive:**

- poor concentration or memory
- difficulty making decisions
- slowed problem solving skills
- repetitive review of the event in your mind

#### **Emotional:**

- periods of lost emotional control
- anxiety, fear, chronic tension
- depression or grief
- guilt and shame
- irritability

#### **Physical:**

- muscle tremors or aches
- stomach upset or heartburn
- chest pain, heart racing, difficulty breathing
- headaches
- fatigue

#### **Behavioral:**

- excessive or impaired sleep
- changes in eating
- withdrawal from others
- increased alcohol consumption

### What can you do to help yourself?

- accept that you have been through a legitimately stressful event
- try to simplify your life and commitments over the next days & weeks
- attend to your eating and sleeping habits
- try to get regular exercise
- be careful in your consumption of alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine
- make a point of being around the people who are most supportive of you

### What does the Chesapeake Circuit Court offer jurors to help deal with the stress?

Once the court case is over, after the verdict and sentence have been delivered and the jury dismissed, a voluntary 60 to 90 minute debriefing session will be offered for jurors to attend on a voluntary basis. The meeting will be led by one or more clinicians trained in Critical Incident Stress Debriefing. The purpose is to provide you with a safe and confidential setting in which to review your involvement in and reactions to the case, with the only people who can fully understand, your fellow jurors. It should allow you to decompress from the intensity of the trial and your role therein. We will provide you with further techniques for relieving stress and give you resources to use should your reactions become too

difficult to confront alone. Stress debriefing is not psychotherapy; it is a service provided to normal people confronting extraordinary events. We will seek to help you put this experience into a useful perspective to carry back with you into your normal life.

## Overcoming the Stress of Jury Duty:

Taking meaning and peace from extraordinary experience

(Developed in collaboration by the Chesapeake Circuit Court and Psychological Services of Chesapeake, PC)

