

The Trauma Response
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After a trauma, people go through a wide range of normal responses. Such reactions are experienced not only by people who were involved in the trauma first-hand, but often also by those who have either witnessed or heard about or have had different kinds of involvement with the person or persons immediately affected. Many reactions tend to be triggered by persons, places or things associated with the trauma. Some reactions may appear totally unrelated. Here is a list of common physical and emotional reactions to trauma, as well as a list of helpful coping strategies. These are NORMAL reactions to ABNORMAL events.

PHYSICAL REACTIONS:

- Aches and pains like headaches, backaches, stomach aches.
- Sudden sweating and/or heart palpitations (fluttering).
- Changes in sleep patterns, appetite, interest in sex.
- Constipation or diarrhea.
- Easily startled by noises or unexpected touch
- More susceptible to colds and illnesses

EMOTIONAL REACTIONS:

- Shock and disbelief
- Fear and/or anxiety
- Grief
- Disorientation
- Denial hyper-alertness or hyper vigilance
- Irritability and/or restlessness
- Outbursts of anger or rage
- Emotional swings - like crying and then laughing
- Worrying or ruminating - intrusive thoughts of the trauma
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks - feeling like the trauma is happening now
- Feelings of panic or feeling out of control
- Increased need to control everyday experiences
- Minimizing the experience
- Attempts to avoid anything associated with trauma
- Tendency to isolate oneself
- Feeling of detachment
- Concern over burdening others with problems

- Emotional numbing
- Restricted range of feelings
- Difficulty trusting and/or feelings of betrayal
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs and / or overeating
- Feelings of self blame
- Survivor guilt
- Shame
- Diminished interest in everyday activities
- Depression
- Unpleasant past memories resurfacing
- Loss of sense of order or fairness in the world
- Expectation of doom and fear of the future

HELPFUL COPING STRATEGIES:

- Mobilize support system - reach out and connect with others, especially those who may have shared the stressful event
- Talk about the traumatic experience - if symptoms are prolonged, consider counseling or therapy
- Cry
- Hard exercise like jogging, aerobics, bicycling, walking
- Relaxation exercise like yoga, stretching, massage
- Humor
- Prayer and/or meditation
- Hot baths
- Music and art
- Maintain balanced diet and sleep cycle as much as possible
- Avoid overusing stimulants like caffeine, sugar, nicotine
- Commitment to something personally meaningful and important everyday
- Hug those you love: hugging releases endogenous opioids, the body's natural painkiller - now you know why it can feel so good!
- Eat warm turkey, boiled onions, baked potatoes, cream based soups - these warm foods are tryptophane activators which help you feel tired but good (like after Thanksgiving dinner)
- Proactive response toward personal/community safety: organize or do something socially active
- Write about your experience - in detail, just for your self or to share with others.

People are usually surprised that reactions to trauma last longer than expected. It may take weeks, months, and in some cases years, to regain equilibrium. Many people will

get through this period on their own, with the help and support of family and friends. But, too often friends and family push to “get over it” before you’re ready, or encourage feeling sorry for or trying to understand the perpetrator. Remind them that such responses are not helpful for recovery right now. Many people find that individual, group or family counseling is helpful. Either way, the key word is ATTACHMENT – ask for help, support and understanding and opportunities to talk.

The Chinese character for crisis is a combination of two words – danger and opportunity. Hardly anyone would choose to be traumatized as a vehicle for growth. Yet our experiences show that people are incredibly resilient, and the worst traumas and crises can become enabling, empowering transformations.