

# Individuals' Reactions to Traumatic Events

A traumatic event, whether an act of violence or terrorism, a disaster or an accident, turns a person's life upside down. By definition, this kind of event causes moderate to severe stress reactions. Affecting survivors, rescue workers, and friends and family members of victims directly involved, a traumatic event may also have an effect on people who witnessed it directly or through the media. Whatever the nature of the event, individuals' experience and reactions to it will be unique to them.

## Normal Reactions to Trauma

Traumatic events have a way of changing a person's perspective, assumptions and expectations of life. They can leave people feeling shocked, saddened and vulnerable. However, it is important to remember that these are normal reactions to an abnormal and unexpected event.

Understanding one's response after a traumatic event may help an individual cope better. The following are common emotional, cognitive, behavioural and physical reactions to stress. A person may experience some or all reactions, or additional changes not included on the list. An individual may immediately feel strong emotions or not notice a change until later. Typically, these reactions subside within two weeks.

### Emotional Reactions

Emotional reactions include

- Shock
- Numbness, feeling nothing
- Anxiety, depression and sadness
- Guilt for being better off than others who survived the event
- Fear of returning to where the incident took place, of another occurrence, of harm to self and loved ones, of being on one's own or having to leave family
- Uncertainty of feelings
- Feeling lost and abandoned
- Feeling overwhelmed

### Cognitive Reactions

Among common cognitive reactions are

- Poor concentration or difficulty making decisions
- Confusion
- Memory loss
- Shortened attention span
- Unwanted memories
- Indecisiveness

### Behavioural Reactions

Behavioural reactions can be

- Irritability, getting into arguments

- Withdrawal
- Suspicion
- Inappropriate humour
- Loss of interest in family, friends and daily routine
- Change in sexual interest
- Increased consumption of nicotine, alcohol and drugs
- Increased or decreased eating

## Physical Reactions

Physical reactions could include

- Headaches, nausea, stomach pains, tightness in the chest, muscle pain (generally feeling unwell)
- Listlessness and feeling tired
- Increased sensitivity to noise or people
- Pounding heart, rapid breathing, edginess
- Loss of appetite
- Tremors
- Disturbed sleep or upsetting thoughts, dreams and nightmares

There is no simple fix to make things better right away, but there are actions that can help the individual cope better and heal from the traumatic event.

## Dos and Don'ts – Coping Strategies

- Understand that everyone reacts differently to trauma. It's OK if one person's response is different from someone else's.
- Give yourself time and permission to feel out of sorts, anxious or sad. Having gone through an ordeal, people will have good and bad days. That's part of the healing process.
- Get plenty of rest, nourishment and exercise (at the minimum, take a walk). Focus on relaxing rather than stressful activities.
- Maintain a usual routine. Make as many daily decisions as possible, encouraging a feeling of control.
- Be more careful around the house and while driving. Accidents are more common after a severely stressful event.
- Express needs and emotions clearly and honestly. Reach out to at least one person who is a good listener and non-judgmental.
- Accept support and help from caring family and friends. An individual might also want to share feelings with others who have also been affected and check to see how they're doing.
- Resolve day-to-day conflicts so they don't build up and add to feelings of stress.
- Help other people in the community as a volunteer. Stay busy.
- Don't attempt to numb the pain with drugs, alcohol, cigarettes or coffee.
- Don't bottle things up. Allowing feelings to come out will help with recovery. Talk, cry, share thoughts, write them in a journal – whatever works.
- Don't shy away from situations, people or places that bring back memories of the event.
- Don't dwell on media reports on the tragedy. Limit time around the sights and sounds of what happened.
- Don't make big life changes or snap decisions until fully recovered from the event.
- Don't try to fight recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks. These are normal and will decrease over time.

## When to Seek Extra Support

Sometimes, the stress can be too big to handle alone. If experiencing any of the following, an individual should consider seeking additional support:

- Inability to take care of self or children
- Continuing to feel numb, tense, confused or exhausted
- Feeling sad or depressed for more than two weeks
- Inability to handle intense feelings, emotions or bodily reactions
- Continuing to have nightmares and a poor sleeping pattern
- Smoking, drinking or taking drugs to excess
- Thinking about suicide
- Continuing to make mistakes or have accidents
- Realising that work performance and relationships are suffering
- Having no one with whom to share emotions, and feeling the need to do so

## Where to Go for Extra Support

Seek support from

- Your GP or other regular physician
- Your employee assistance programme (EAP)
- A mental health counsellor
- Local support groups
- A religious or spiritual leader
- A suicide prevention hotline

## Source

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *Coping with a traumatic event*. Retrieved 1 September 2021 from <https://www.cdc.gov>

Sulaski, C. & Schuette, B. (Ed.). (Revised 2021 [Ed.]). *Individual's reactions to traumatic events*. London: Workplace Options.

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