

Common Responses to Trauma -- and Coping Strategies

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After a trauma, people may go through a wide range of normal responses.

Such reactions may be experienced not only by people who experienced the trauma first-hand, but by those who have witnessed or heard about the trauma, or been involved with those immediately affected. Many reactions can 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
- increased use of alcohol or drugs and/or overeating

EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

- shock and disbelief
- fear and/or anxiety
- grief, disorientation, denial
- hyper-alertness or hypervigilance
- irritability, 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 helplessness, panic, feeling out of control
- increased need to control everyday experiences
- minimizing the experience
- attempts to avoid anything associated with trauma
- tendency to isolate oneself
- feelings of detachment
- concern over burdening others with problems
- emotional numbing or restricted range of feelings
- difficulty trusting and/or feelings of betrayal
- difficulty concentrating or remembering
- feelings of self-blame and/or survivor guilt
- shame
- diminished interest in everyday activities or depression

- unpleasant past memories resurfacing
- loss of a sense of order or fairness in the world; expectation of doom and fear of the future

HELPFUL COPING STRATEGIES

- mobilize a support system – reach out and connect with others, especially those who may have shared the stressful event
- talk about the traumatic experience with empathic listeners
- cry
- hard exercise like jogging, aerobics, bicycling, walking
- relaxation exercise like yoga, stretching, massage
- humor
- prayer and/or meditation; listening to relaxing guided imagery; progressive deep muscle relaxation
- hot baths
- music and art
- maintain balanced diet and sleep cycle as much as possible
- avoid over-using stimulants like caffeine, sugar, or nicotine
- commitment to something personally meaningful and important every day
- hug those you love, pets included
- eat warm turkey, boiled onions, baked potatoes, cream-based soups – these are tryptophane activators, which help you feel tired but good (like after Thanksgiving dinner)
- proactive responses toward personal and community safety – organize or do something socially active
- write about your experience – in detail, just for yourself or to share with others

People are usually surprised that reactions to trauma can last longer than they expected. It may take weeks, months, and in some cases, many years to fully regain equilibrium. Many people will get through this period with the help and support of family and friends. But sometimes friends and family may push people to "get over it" before they're ready. Let them know that such responses are not helpful for you right now, though you appreciate that they are trying to help. Many people find that individual, group, or family counseling are helpful, and in particular, EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) is a phenomenally rapid and wonderful therapeutic method. Either way, the key word is CONNECTION – ask for help, support, understanding, and opportunities to talk.

The Chinese character for crisis is a combination of two words -- danger and opportunity. People who fully engage in recovery from trauma discover unexpected benefits. As they gradually heal their wounds, survivors find that they are also developing inner strength, compassion for others, increasing self-awareness, and often the most surprising -- a greater ability to experience joy and serenity than ever before.