

Trauma

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The world is certainly changing at a faster pace than we can keep up with...Technology has brought with it many wonderful advantages, such as enhanced communication, a longer lifespan, and more leisure time than ever before. Yet, somehow, one thing has remained the same throughout the years and may even be on the rise – the frequency and quantity of trauma that humans have to face. No matter how desperately we try, we cannot keep up with new diseases, new terrors, and new wars. Today's column will discuss what psychologists know about common reactions to traumatic events and how to cope effectively.

Below are some reactions common to people who experience traumatic stress as a result of witnessing, hearing about, or being involved in a traumatic event. Everyone who is exposed to such an event is affected by it and may experience some reaction. Being party to a traumatic incident such as war reminds us that we are also vulnerable to tragedy. Our protective belief that “nothing could happen to me or to people I know” can be momentarily stripped away.

During the event and in the first 24 hours after it you may experience some initial shock reactions that represent a wide variety of emotions from feeling anger or fear to being numb or detached from your feelings. You might feel somewhat disoriented or cut off from the environment around you. When directly involved, you may also experience a number of physical shock reactions such as nausea, perspiration, tremors, loss of body control, i.e., bladder control, uncontrollable crying or laughing, etc.

In the days following the event you may experience any of a large number of thoughts, feelings, physical reactions, and actions that may vary in intensity and duration. Although they can be upsetting, it is important to remember that they are normal reactions to a frightening and “abnormal” situation. These reactions are likely to become less frequent and eventually disappear within the weeks ahead. If you continue to be concerned, you may want to seek professional assistance (e.g., our counseling center).



Possible Cognitive or Emotional Reactions:

- Recurring dreams or nightmares about the event
- Feelings of confusion or impaired judgment
- Experiencing a sense of powerlessness/helplessness
- Repeated thought or memories of the event which are hard to stop
- Experiencing fear and anxiety when things remind you of the event
- Feeling bursts of anger or intense irritability
- Feeling isolated
- Reconstructing the event in your mind, in an effort to construct a different outcome
- Trouble concentrating or remembering things
- Questioning your spiritual or religious beliefs
- Feeling numb, withdrawn or disconnected
- Feeling depressed, sad, or down much of the time
- Experiencing a sense of injustice
- Feeling a sense of emptiness or hopelessness about the future

Possible Behavioral or Physical Reactions:

- Being overprotective of your safety
- Increased consumption of food, drugs, alcohol
- Change in eating behavior or sexual interest
- Avoiding activities that remind you of the event; avoiding places or people that bring back memories
- Keeping excessively busy to avoid thinking about the event and what has happened to you
- Isolating yourself from others
- Becoming very alert at times, and startling easily
- Problems getting to sleep or staying asleep
- Increased conflict with family members or other people
- Being tearful or crying for no apparent reason – any behavior that for you is atypical
- Gastro-intestinal problems (e.g., nausea)
- Vascular, cardio-vascular and muscular problems
- Allergies, skin rashes
- Fluctuations in blood pressure

Coping Strategies:

It is important during times of stress to take steps to renew and care for yourself.

- Healing and recovering from the emotional effects of the event will take time. When you can, allow yourself to feel emotions such as sadness, anger or grief over what has happened. **Talking to others about how you are feeling is important.**
- Try to keep your personal routines in place such as regular meal times and other personal rituals. These will help you to feel as though your life has some sense of order.
- Upsetting times can cause people to drink alcohol or to use drugs in a way that causes other problems. Try to cope with your stresses without increasing your drinking. Alcohol and drugs won't help in the long run.
- Healthy practices such as eating well, exercising and getting enough sleep are especially important in time of high stress.
- This is a difficult time, and everyone's emotions are closer to the surface. Try to be understanding and forgiving of yourself and others.
- Don't let yourself become isolated.** Maintain connections with your friends, relatives, neighbors, coworkers, or members of your religious community. Talk about your experiences with them.
- Minimize the amount of television and media coverage you absorb on a daily basis.