

Information Sheet

Common Responses to Trauma

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

Such reactions may be experienced not only by people who experience the trauma first-hand, but by those who have witnessed or heard about the incident, or been involved with those immediately affected. Many reactions can be triggered by persons, places, or things associated with the trauma. Some reactions may seem totally unrelated. Previous experiences or memories of trauma may also be re-triggered as a result of a recent event.

Here is a list of common physical and emotional reactions to trauma. You may find you have some or all of these symptoms, but the important thing to remember is that whatever your reaction it is a NORMAL response to an ABNORMAL event.

Emotional Reactions

You may also experience the following emotional reactions to the trauma.

- Shock and disbelief
- Fear and/or anxiety
- Grief, disorientation, denial
- Over-alert or feeling on edge
- Irritability, restlessness, outbursts of anger or rage
- Emotional swings-like crying and then laughing
- Worrying or 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
- Minimising what happened
- 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

Physical Reactions

In addition to any physical injuries as a result of the trauma you may also experience the following physical symptoms

- Aches and pains like headaches, back aches, stomach aches
- Sudden sweating and/or heart palpitations (fluttering)
- Changes in sleep patterns, appetite, interest in sex
- Constipation or diarrhea
- Easily startled by noise or unexpected touch
- More susceptible to colds and illnesses
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs and/or overeating

The Chinese character for crisis is a combination of 2 words– danger and opportunity. People who fully engage in recovery from trauma discover unexpected benefits. As they gradually heal their wounds, survivors find 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.

Source: Patti Levin, 2003