

Common Symptoms Following A Traumatic Event

After experiencing a traumatic event, it is very common, in fact quite normal for people to experience a wide range of emotional or physical reactions. These responses may appear immediately after the event, or some time later. They may last for a few days, a few weeks, or even longer; these are normal reactions to an abnormal situation. It's important to understand that like the flu, your reactions will run their course and you will feel better in time. The following are some of the most common symptoms. See "Taking Care of Yourself and Others after a Traumatic Event" for suggestions on how to prevent and better cope with the symptoms. If they persist for more than a couple of weeks without improvement and are impairing work or home life, seek help through your local medical facility and helping agencies.

Emotional

- Fear
- Anxiety
- Depression, Sadness, Grief
- Feeling hopeless or helpless
- Feeling numb
- Irritability, agitation
- Inappropriate emotional response
- Anger
- Guilt, survivor guilt
- Phobias
- Denial
- Excessive worry about others
- Feeling overwhelmed

Cognitive (Thought)

- Confusion
- Difficulty concentrating and making decisions
- Memory problems
- Shortened attention span
- Overly critical
- Preoccupation with the event
- Flashbacks
- Hyper vigilance
- Overly sensitive

Behavioral

- Social withdrawal/Silence
- Hyper alert to environment
- Suspiciousness
- Emotional outbursts, loss of control
- Changes from typical behavior
- Avoiding thoughts, feelings of situations related to the event
- Changes in communications
- Change in sexual function
- Increased consumption of alcohol or other chemicals
- Inability to rest
- Loss or increase of appetite

Physical

- Nausea/Diarrhea
- Shallow breathing
- Twitches/Tremors
- Dizziness/Faintness
- Chills/Sweating
- Easily startled/Jittery
- Fatigue
- Changes in appetite
- Sleep disturbances and nightmares
- Headaches
- Grinding teeth

Taking Care of Yourself and Others Following a Traumatic Event

- Eat well-balanced and regular meals (even if you don't feel like it).
- Alternating periods of appropriate physical exercise with periods of relaxation will alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Get plenty of rest and continue your exercise regimen.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams, or flashbacks are normal-don't try to fight them-they'll decrease over time and become less painful.
- Avoid using alcohol, illicit drugs or excessive amounts of prescription drugs; while they may seem to numb you, they can increase depression, anxiety or other unproductive emotional responses that prevent you from supporting coworkers, family, and friends.
- Reach out – people do care; spend time with others and talk to people – talk is the most healing medicine.
- Continue to do things that keep your morale up.
- Maintain as normal a schedule as possible, and structure your time – keep busy.
- You're normal and having normal reactions – don't label yourself as crazy.
- Help your coworkers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing.
- Realize those around you are under stress and make allowances.
- Keep a journal to jot down worries or plans during any sleepless hours and get them off your mind.
- Don't make any big life changes. Do make as many daily decisions as possible which will give you a feeling of control over your life, i.e., if someone asks you what you want to eat – answer them even if you're not sure.
- Rely on your faith.

For Family Members and Friends

- Listen carefully.
- Spend time with anyone who has been affected by the trauma.
- Offer your assistance and a listening ear if they have not asked for help.
- Reassure them that they are safe.
- Help them with everyday tasks like cleaning, cooking, caring for the family, minding children – instead of asking “is there anything I can do?” offer something specific tailored to their needs.
- Give them some private time.
- Don't take their anger or other feelings personally.
- Don't tell them that they are lucky it wasn't worse” – traumatized people are not consoled by those statements. Instead, tell them that you are sorry such an event has occurred and you want to understand and assist them.
- Encourage them to exercise, avoid intoxicating substances.
- For kids, explain what has happened at their level. Let their questions guide you. Maintain normal routines and activities. Allow the expression of their feelings. Play and drawing can allow them to vent those feelings.