

Reactions to Trauma

Emotional Reactions

IMMEDIATE REACTIONS

- Numbness and detachment
- Anxiety or severe fear
- Guilt (including survivor guilt)
- Exhilaration as a result of surviving
- Anger
- Sadness
- Helplessness
- Feeling unreal; depersonalization (feeling as if you are watching yourself)
- Disorientation
- Feeling out of control
- Denial
- Constriction of feelings
- Feeling overwhelmed

DELAYED REACTIONS

- Irritability and/or hostility
- Depression
- Mood swings, instability
- Anxiety (phobia, generalized anxiety)
- Fear of trauma recurrence
- Grief reactions
- Shame
- Feelings of fragility and/or vulnerability
- Emotional detachment from anything that requires emotional reactions (significant and/or family relationships, conversations about self, discussion of traumatic events or reactions to them)

Cognitive Reactions

IMMEDIATE REACTIONS

- Difficulty concentrating
- Rumination or racing thoughts (replaying the traumatic event over and over again)
- Distortion of time and space (traumatic event may be perceived as if it was happening in slow motion, or a few seconds can be perceived as minutes)
- memory problems (not being able to recall important aspects of the trauma)
- Strong identification with victims

DELAYED REACTIONS

- Intrusive memories or flashbacks
- Reactivation of previous traumatic events
- Self-blame
- preoccupation with event
- Difficulty making decisions
- Magical thinking: belief that certain behaviors, including avoidant behavior, will protect against future trauma
- Belief that feelings or memories are dangerous
- Generalization of triggers (a person who experiences a home invasion in the daytime may avoid being alone during the day)
- Suicidal thinking

Physical Reactions

IMMEDIATE REACTIONS

- Nausea and/or gastrointestinal distress
- Sweating or shivering
- Faintness
- Muscle tremors or uncontrollable shaking
- Elevated heartbeat, respiration, and blood pressure
- Extreme fatigue or exhaustion
- Greater startle responses
- Depersonalization

DELAYED REACTIONS

- Sleep disturbances, nightmares
- Somatization (increased focus on and worry about body aches and pains)
- Appetite and digestive changes
- lowered resistance to colds and infection
- Persistent fatigue
- Elevated cortisol levels
- Hyperarousal
- Long-term health effects including heart, liver, autoimmune, and COPD

Existential Reactions

IMMEDIATE REACTIONS

- Intense use of prayer
- Restoration of faith in the goodness of others (receiving help from others)
- Loss of self-efficacy
- Despair about humanity, particularly if the event was intentional
- Immediate disruption of life assumptions (fairness, safety, goodness, predictability of life, etc.)

DELAYED REACTIONS

- Questioning ("why me?")
- Increased cynicism, disillusionment
- Increased self-confidence ("if I can survive this, I can survive anything")
- Loss of purpose
- Renewed faith
- Hopelessness
- Reestablishing priorities
- Redefining meaning and importance of life
- Reworking life's assumptions to accommodate the trauma (taking a self-defense class to reestablish a sense of safety)

Behavioral Reactions

IMMEDIATE REACTIONS

- Startled reaction
- Restlessness
- Sleep and appetite disturbances
- Difficulty expressing oneself
- Argumentative behavior
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco
- Withdrawal and apathy
- Avoidant behaviors

DELAYED REACTIONS

- Avoidance of event reminders
- Social relationship disturbances
- Decreased activity level
- Engagement in high-risk behaviors
- Increased use of alcohol and drugs
- Withdrawal