

Riverside Trauma Center

Reactions to Highly Stressful or Potentially Traumatic Events

After a loss or other highly stressful or potentially traumatic event people usually experience a wide range of reactions. These reactions generally fall into six domains (outlined below). For many people, reactions in the immediate aftermath of an event change and shift rapidly. All of these reactions are normal and to be expected.

It may be helpful to have a sense of where you fall on each continuum of types of reaction, keeping in mind that this can change and shift (in either direction) at any time. For most people, over time, reactions tend to move towards the right end of the continuums.

At the same time, there are things that people can do to take care of themselves in each domain which can help to ease some of the reactions that might be causing them continued distress (see other side for some suggestions).

Reaction Continuums

Emotional	Shock; Sorrow; Anger; Guilt; Fear; Numbness	←————→	Feeling some control of your emotions; Experiencing some positive emotions
Cognitive/ Thinking	Confusion; Intrusive thoughts; Short-term memory problems; Difficulty concentrating, Mind racing	←————→	Thinking and remembering as clearly as usual
Behavioral	Irritability; Difficulty sleeping; Lack of pleasure in regular activities; Quick to snap at people	←————→	Acting "like yourself"
Physical	Fatigue; Exhaustion; Stomachaches; Easily startled; Body aches; Headaches	←————→	No noticeable physical symptoms
Relational	Withdrawal; Fighting; Fear of being alone; Feeling obligated to interact with people	←————→	Interacting with others in safe and healthy ways; Accepting support when needed
Spiritual/ Meaning-Making	"Nothing matters." "Why would God do this?" "Why do I bother to do this kind of work?"	←————→	Finding meaning and hope in your life

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Strategies for Coping

While people experience a range of reactions to a greater or lesser degree after a highly stressful or potentially traumatic experience, generally most people are resilient and are okay after a while. It takes time to recover, however, most people find ways of integrating their experiences into their lives as they move forward. This is an incredibly personal process, but there are some things that many survivors of potentially traumatic events have found helpful.

Emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow yourself to experience what you feel (cry, shake, breathe deeply, etc.) • Label what you are experiencing • Find a partner to vent to • Practice moderation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be assertive when needed • Engage in activities that enhance positive emotions • Use and enjoy positive humor • Add your own: _____
Cognitive/ Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write things down • Make small, daily decisions • Review previous successful problem-solving • Remember you have choices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus on being flexible • Use problem-solving skills • Engage in downward comparisons • Add your own: _____
Behavioral	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do activities that were previously enjoyable • Set goals, have a plan • Get involved with others in working for a justice that restores • Ask others how they think you are doing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restore or develop safe routines • Plan ahead and prepare for possible high-risk situations • Avoid avoidance • Add your own: _____
Physical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Drink water and minimize caffeine • Engage in physical activity (dance, run, yoga, etc) • Practice relaxation exercises • Listen to and take care of your body 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get good, uninterrupted sleep • Avoid high-risk, dangerous sensation-seeking behaviors • Add your own: _____
Relational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make plans with people who feel supportive (consider, at least temporarily, limiting time with those who do not) • Give back and help others • Talk to others who have survived similar experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance time spent with others with time for yourself • Lean on others, accept help • Use community resources such as websites, telephone hotlines, etc. • Add your own: _____
Spiritual/ Meaning- Making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sing, paint, write poetry, journal, etc. • Read stories of other survivors who overcame hard times • Use faith to rekindle a sense of hope in yourself and others • Ask the hard questions boldly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek inspiration, guidance, and comfort from prayer, meditation, etc. • Talk to your clergy or other religious leaders • Forgive others and forgive yourself • Add your own: _____

Adapted from Meichenbaum (2012), and Yoder (2002)

For the majority of people, their reactions change over time (even if they come around to the same reactions again and again). However, some people feel that they are just stuck. If nothing is changing, it may be helpful to reach out to someone such as a counselor or clergy member for additional support.

