

WHEN TERRIBLE THINGS HAPPEN WHAT YOU MAY EXPERIENCE

Immediate Reactions

There are a wide variety of positive and negative reactions that people can experience during and immediately following severe stress. These include:

DOMAIN	NEGATIVE RESPONSES	POSITIVE RESPONSES
Cognitive	Confusion, disorientation, worry, intrusive thoughts and images, self-blame.	Determination and resolve, sharper perception, courage, optimism, faith
Emotional	Shock, sorrow, grief, sadness, fear, anger, numb, irritability, guilt and shame	Feeling involved, challenged, mobilized
Social	Extreme withdrawal, interpersonal conflict	Social connectedness, altruistic helping behaviors
Psychological	Fatigue, headache, muscle tension, stomachache, increased heart rate, exaggerated startle response, difficulties sleeping	Alertness, readiness to respond, increased energy

Common negative reactions that may continue include:

Intrusive reactions

- Distressing thoughts or images of the event while awake or dreaming
- Upsetting emotional or physical reactions to reminders of the experience
- Feeling like the experience is happening all over again (“flashback”)

Avoidance and withdrawal reactions

- Avoid talking, thinking, and having feelings about the traumatic event
- Avoid reminders of the event (places and people connected to what happened)
- Restricted emotions; feeling numb
- Feelings of detachment and estrangement from others; social withdrawal
- Loss of interest in usually pleasurable activities

Physical arousal reactions

- Constantly being "on the lookout" for danger, startling easily, or being jumpy
- Irritability or outbursts of anger, feeling "on edge"
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep, problems concentrating or paying attention

Reactions to trauma and loss reminders

- Reactions to places, people, sights, sounds, smells, and feelings that are reminders of the event
- Reminders can bring on distressing mental images, thoughts, and emotional/physical reactions

Positive changes in priorities, worldview, and expectations

- Enhanced appreciation that family and friends are precious and important
- Meeting the challenge of addressing difficulties (by taking positive action steps, changing the focus of thoughts, using humor, acceptance)
- Shifting expectations about what to expect from day to day and about what is considered a “good day”
- Shifting priorities to focus more on quality time with family or friends
- Increased commitment to self, family, friends, and spiritual/religious faith

When a Loved One Dies, Common Reactions Include:

- Feeling confused, numb, disbelief, bewildered, or lost
- Feeling angry at the person who died or at people considered responsible for the death
- Strong physical reactions such as nausea, fatigue, shakiness, and muscle weakness
- Feeling guilty for still being alive
- Intense emotions such as extreme sadness, anger, or fear
- Increased risk for physical illness and injury
- Decreased productivity or difficulties making decisions
- Having thoughts about the person who died, even when you don’t want to
- Longing, missing, and wanting to search for the person who died
- Children and adolescents are particularly likely to worry that they or a parent might die
- Children and adolescents may become anxious when separated from caregivers or other loved ones

WHAT HELPS

Talking to another person for support or spending time with others

Focusing on something practical that you can do right now to manage the situation better

Engaging in positive distracting activities (sports, hobbies, reading)

Using relaxation methods (breathing exercises, meditation, calming self-talk, soothing music)

Getting adequate rest and eating healthy meals

Participating in a support group

Trying to maintain a normal schedule

Exercising in moderation

Scheduling pleasant activities

Keeping a journal

Taking breaks

Seeking counseling

Reminiscing about a loved one who has died

WHAT DOESN'T HELP

Using alcohol or drugs to cope

Working too much

Extreme avoidance of thinking or talking about the event or a death of a loved one

Extreme withdrawal from family or friends

Violence or conflict

Not taking care of yourself

Overeating or failing to eat

Doing risky things (driving recklessly, substance abuse, not taking adequate precautions)

Excessive TV or computer games

Withdrawing from pleasant activities

Blaming others