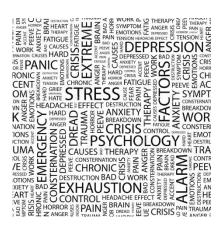
## Coping with Traumatic Experience: Common Responses

Most people who are involved in traumatic circumstances will experience some kind of emotional reaction. Although each person's experience is different, there are a number of common responses that are felt by most people involved in highly stressful situations. It is reassuring to know that, even though these reactions can be very unpleasant, they are typical human responses to abnormal events or situations. You are not "losing your mind" or "going crazy" just because you have these reactions.



It is often difficult for those who were not involved in a traumatic incident to understand what you are going through. You may wish to show this sheet to friends and relatives, and perhaps discuss your reactions with them.

## Normal reactions to trauma

Emotional reactions		disbelief at what happened feeling numb, as if things are unreal
	•	of being blamed for the event - or parts of it of a recurrence for the safety of oneself or one's family of apparently unrelated events
	Anger •	at who caused it or "allowed it to happen" at the injustice and senselessness of it all generalised anger and irritability
	•	about the losses, human and/or material about the loss of feelings of safety/security feeling depressed for no apparent reason
		for having appeared helpless or emotional for not behaving as you would have liked
Physical reactions	•	difficulty falling to sleep due to intrusive thoughts restless and disturbed sleep feeling tired and fatigued
		general agitation and muscle tension unexplained palpitations, trembling, or sweating breathing difficulties recurrent headaches or general aches and pains nausea, diarrhoea, or constipation
`Thinking' reactions		indicate of recently the experience
	Dreams •	distressing dreams or nightmares about what happened unpleasant dreams of other frightening things
		difficulty making simple decisions inability to concentrate memory problems

Behavioural
reactions

Social • withdrawal from others and a need to be alone

• being easily irritated by others

feelings of detachment from others, even loved ones

• loss of interest in normal activities and hobbies

Work • not wanting to go to work

poor motivation at work

• poor concentration and attention

Lifestyle/habits

• increased use of alcohol, cigarettes, or other drugs

• loss of appetite - or increased eating

loss of interest in enjoyable activities

loss of sexual interest

**Reactions are a sign of adaptation.** These signs and symptoms are common reactions to a lifethreatening or value-challenging experience. Sometimes reactions may not occur until quite some time after the event. Most of these responses are part of the normal process of psychological recovery and they help the person adapt to the trauma. They can, however, be very unpleasant for those affected and for their loved ones.

**How long do reactions to trauma last?** Usually these reactions will diminish over a period of days, weeks or months, although some may last longer, even for years. This is especially so if the experience was particularly disturbing. You may also find that these reactions get worse when you are reminded of the event or when you discuss your experiences with other people. Try not to let that stop you from talking about it - in the long term, sharing your experiences and feelings with trusted others will help.

**Reactions are quite normal.** Remember, it is common for people who have experienced highly stressful events or situations to have adjustment difficulties and to display some or many of the reactions described above. This is our normal way of attempting to resolve the psychological impact of such unusual experiences. If, however, these responses persist or are severe, then please seek support.

When would further assistance be necessary? Some people benefit from extra assistance in resolving the effects of a highly stressful experience. Needing such assistance is not a sign of weakness or an indication that you are losing your mind. Often, the help you receive will be brief and simple, and will reduce the chances that you will have longer term difficulties. You are encouraged to seek further assistance if:

- the problems described above are particularly severe, or if they continue for more than two or three months
- you feel numb or empty and do not have appropriate feelings
- you find yourself keeping busy all the time in order to avoid having time to think and explore your thoughts and emotions
- · you are listless and continually depressed and cannot seem to get 'energised'
- you have no friends or family with whom you can talk about the experience and how you feel about it
- you are using alcohol or drugs to help you cope
- you have any other concerns about the way you, your family, or colleagues are coping

What if I don't react at all? It should be noted that some individuals may not experience any significant reactions to an event that generally may be considered traumatic. This should not necessarily be a cause for concern to them or to others. Some people, by virtue of prior experience, training, and/or personal qualities, may cope well with such incidents. Of course, coping well with one potentially traumatic event does not guarantee that you will always cope well. Individual resilience varies over time and across situations.