

Reactions To Trauma

What is trauma?

A trauma can be any distressing or upsetting event. Common traumas include accidents, disasters, or being hurt deliberately by other people. You might have experienced a trauma first-hand, or may have witnessed or heard about it. Trauma can happen to adults or to children, and it may have been one-off or repeated.



How should I be feeling?

Traumas are shocking events, and it is normal to feel overwhelmed. Not everybody reacts in the same way though, and there is no 'right' way to respond. We all naturally have coping abilities and many people will start to feel better with the passage of time. Some people's recovery is slower and we may need help to overcome what happened.

Ways in which trauma affects people

Some of the most common reactions to trauma are listed here. These reactions are often linked to one another – one may lead to another. It is not your fault if you are experiencing (or not experiencing) any of these.

Re-experiencing

Many people re-experience what happened to them. You might find yourself playing the event over in your mind, or experience memories of the event coming back unexpectedly.

- Flashbacks – unwanted memories where it can feel as though the trauma is happening again
- Nightmares – bad dreams or unwanted memories during the night
- Physical reactions – we may feel in our bodies what we felt at the time

Trauma memories are often very vivid and can be re-experienced in any of our senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, touch)

Increased arousal ('hyper-arousal')

Fear and anxiety are natural (and helpful) responses to dangerous situations. These feelings often last for a long time after the trauma is over. You might find that reminders of the trauma trigger feelings of anxiety, or it might feel as though anxiety occurs out-of-the-blue. You might feel jumpy, jittery, or find it hard to concentrate. Your sleep may be affected leaving you exhausted and restless. Physically you might feel nauseous, fatigued, have headaches, or your appetite might be affected.

Avoidance

Avoidance is a normal human way of managing pain and upset. Many people find themselves avoiding people, places, or situations that remind them of what happened. You might find yourself trying to avoid having certain thoughts or feelings. Some people might find that they 'zone out' at certain times, which can be the mind's way of avoiding strong feelings.

Changes in beliefs

Traumatic events can lead to big changes in how we view the world – or ourselves. This is especially true if you have had bad experiences at other time. Some common changes in the way we think can include:

- Finding the world a more threatening place
- Blaming ourselves for what happened
- Finding it hard to trust other people – this is especially common if people have hurt us, and can impact our relationships
- Not seeing the point in life or struggling to find things meaningful
- Worry that we are losing control or going crazy

Strong feelings and emotions

As well as anxiety, trauma can expose us to many strong emotions. All of these are common:

- **Anger and irritability** – especially if you are stressed and not getting enough sleep
- **Guilt and shame** – people often blame themselves for things they did or didn't do, or feel judged by others
- **Grief and depression** – you might be grieving for what you lost or feeling sadness about how your world has changed

What can I do to help someone who has experienced trauma?

There is a lot you can do for someone who has survived trauma:

- Let them know that you care about them and are there if they need help
- Let them know that you are willing to listen if they want to talk about how they are feeling or what they experienced
- Don't judge them for ways they are reacting, or things they have done
- Don't force them to speak if that is not what they want
- Help them with basic needs if they require assistance (e.g. food, housing, money)