

COMMON STRESS REACTIONS FOLLOWING EXPOSURE TO A TRAUMATIC EVENT¹

There are a number of common reactions people have when they are exposed to a traumatic event.

Psychological and Emotional

- Initial euphoria, relief
- Guilt about surviving or not having suffered as much as others
- Anxiety, fear, insecurity, worry
- Feelings of helplessness, inadequacy, being overwhelmed
- Vulnerability or shame, anger over vulnerability
- Loss of sense of power, control, well-being, self-confidence, trust
- Irritability, restlessness, impatience, agitation, anger, blaming
- Mood swings
- Despair, grief, sadness
- Periods of crying, emotional “attacks” or “pangs”
- Feelings of emptiness, loss, hopelessness, depression
- Reawakening of past trauma, painful experiences
- Feelings of isolation, detachment, estrangement, “no one else can understand”
- “Flashbacks,” intrusive memories of the event, illusions, pseudo-hallucinations
- Recurrent dreams of the event or other traumas

Cognitive (thinking)

- Poor concentration
- Forgetfulness
- Inability to make judgments and decisions
- Loss of appropriate sense of reality (denial of reality, fantasies to counteract reality)
- Preoccupation with the event
- Rigidity
- Confusion regarding religious beliefs/value systems; breakdown of meaning and faith
- Self-criticism over things done/not done during trauma
- Awareness of own and loved ones’ mortality

¹ Adapted from <http://www.mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/dtac/CommonStressReactions.asp> 2004