



Brown University  
Counseling and Psychological Services

## Normal Reactions to Tragic Events

When we experience a traumatic loss that is outside the normal range of our daily experience, the stress of dealing with the aftermath of the tragedy may have overwhelmed many of our normal coping strategies.

### What are normal reactions?

No one who sees or experiences a traumatic event is untouched by it. In fact, trauma impacts all areas of an individual's life. Although everyone reacts differently, the following are some common and normal reactions:

| Physical             | Cognitive            | Emotional         | Behavioral          |
|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| Lack of energy       | Who? What?           | Anxiety           | Withdrawal          |
| Nausea               | When? Why?           | Fear              | Outbursts           |
| Tightness in chest   | Shock, disbelief     | Sadness & despair | Change in activity  |
| Difficulty breathing | Denial               | Guilt & blame     | Insomnia            |
| Weakness             | Confusion            | Numbness          | Changes in appetite |
| Headaches            | Recurrent thoughts   | Panic             | Drinking alcohol    |
| Rapid heart rate     | Poor concentration   | Vulnerability     | Taking drugs        |
| Grinding of teeth    | Memory problems      | Helplessness      | Pacing              |
| Dry mouth, thirst    | "Scattered"          | Anger             | Avoidance           |
| Vomiting             | Poor decisions       | Irritability      | Crying              |
| Visual difficulties  | Poor problem solving | Loss of control   | Sighing             |
| Feeling shaky        | Nightmares           | Loss of faith     | Restless activity   |
| Profuse sweating     | Intrusive images     | Loneliness        |                     |
| Chills               | Hypervigilance       | Relief            |                     |
| Sickness             |                      | Regret            |                     |

### What factors influence how people respond?

Reactions to a traumatic event can vary according to:

- Level of exposure to the incident
- Level of functioning and stress prior to the event
- Previous experience with loss and crisis
- Degree of social support available
- Spiritual involvement

## Important Points to Remember

- It is common for people to experience intense aftershocks following a horrible event. It is important for you to know that these reactions:
  - Are **normal** and do not imply craziness or weakness; in fact, their absence is more of a cause for concern.
  - Sometimes occur during or immediately after the event; sometimes they occur days later; other times weeks or months may pass before they appear.
  - May last a few days, a few weeks, a few months, or occasionally longer depending on the severity of the event.
  - May be triggered at some later point in your life by something that reminds you of the event (e.g., sights or smells, anniversary, news reports about a similar event).
  - May be made worse by insensitive reactions of others (e.g., friends and family who “say the wrong thing,” media reports which may appear blaming and callous, etc.).
- Basic assumptions about the world are likely to be challenged. Most people approach daily life with the beliefs that:
  - They are safe.
  - Events are orderly, predictable, controllable, and fair.
  - People are trustworthy and worth relating to.

With these beliefs, we can proceed through life with relative confidence. However, when a tragedy shakes or shatters these beliefs, a person may lose hope and see the world and life as filled with danger, uncertainty, and suffering. The rebuilding of a more balanced and positive belief system is an important task for individuals who have experienced a traumatic event.

- Some questions may never have satisfactory answers. In their efforts to understand and give meaning to a tragedy, survivors often struggle with questions like:
  - Why did this happen?
  - Could it have been anticipated or predicted?
  - Could it have been stopped or changed through human action?
  - What could I have done differently?

While many opinions may be expressed in response to these questions, answers to these questions will typically be ambiguous and elusive.

- Most people are extraordinarily resilient and able to “bounce back” after experiencing a tragedy. Following a crisis, people often feel overwhelmed and distressed, but these responses are normally transitory in nature and rarely suggest a serious mental disturbance or illness. Experiencing a tragic event can uncover an individual’s previously hidden strengths and unmined abilities. Seeking help when one is in need of it is a sign of strength and can aid in resilience. If you need assistance, Counseling and Psychological Services is one place to reach for it. We can be reached at 401-863-3476 for routine and crisis appointments during normal business hours, and for crisis telephone contact outside of business hours.