



Summary

Many of the reactions to trauma are connected to one another. Many people think that their common reactions to the trauma mean that they are “going crazy” or “losing it.” These thoughts can make them even more fearful. As you become aware of the changes you have gone through in these experiences and as you process these experiences, the symptoms should become less distressing.

If you find yourself thinking - “Yup, this is me” or maybe you recognize these things in a friend, please reach out to the resources around you for education and support. Trauma-related stress has nothing to do with being “broken”, “weak” or “crazy”. It just means you are a human being who has witnessed or experienced some terrible events in our world. The great thing is that there are effective therapies that help to process and organize these experiences, giving us back a sense of competence and control over our thoughts and feelings.

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Common Reactions to Traumatic Events



Concepts and excerpts taken from the document adapted by Tina Casola, LMFT, Behavioral Wellness provider specializing in first responders and disaster services personnel from materials in the Prolonged Exposure Therapy protocol developed by Edna Foa, PhD, Director of the Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety @ U Penn. These “Common Reactions to Trauma” are part of the PE Protocol developed by Edna Foa, PhD and her team (with some adaptations). This is one of the trusted protocols used to treat PTSD in the Veterans Health Administration.

When traumatic events impact our entire community – it can be especially troubling



The sense of safety and security that comes with being “home” is gone in an instant. We may have trouble with our emotions, or getting along with our family or neighbors. We might find it hard to get back to work and establish a new normal with all the changes. These are some common reactions to trauma that most people experience in the wake of these events. Most people who have experienced trauma have similar responses.

1. Fear and Anxiety

Anxiety is a common and natural response to a dangerous situation. For many people it lasts long after the trauma has ended. Triggers or cues that can cause anxiety may include places, times of day, certain smells and tastes, noises, or any situation that reminds you of the trauma. As you begin to pay more attention to the times you feel afraid, you can discover the triggers for your anxiety. In this way, you may learn that some of the out-of-the-blue anxiety is really triggered by things that remind you of the trauma.

2. Re-experiencing the Trauma

People who have been traumatized often “re-experience” the traumatic event through unwanted thoughts that are difficult to get rid of – your brain gets hijacked when you don’t want it to. Nightmares are also common. If you are with someone who is sleeping and experiencing a nightmare – do not wake them unless they are at risk of harming themselves or someone else.

3. Increased Arousal

This includes feeling jumpy, jittery, and shaky; being easily startled; and having trouble concentrating or sleeping. Continuous arousal can lead to impatience and irritability, especially if you’re not getting enough sleep. People who have been traumatized may feel like bodies are on constant alert, always ready to respond immediately to any attack. Another reaction to danger is to freeze, like the deer in the headlights, this reaction can also occur during a trauma and can lead to feelings of embarrassment and a sense of incompetence in the individual.

4. Avoidance

Avoidance is a common way of managing trauma-related pain. The most common is avoiding situations that remind you of the trauma, such as the place where it occurred. Another way to reduce discomfort is to try to push away painful thoughts and feelings [often through overworking, alcohol misuse, and engaging in activities to keep our minds occupied]. This can lead to feelings of numbness, where you find it difficult to have both fearful and pleasant feelings. Sometimes the painful thoughts or feelings may be so intense that your mind just blocks them out altogether, and you may not remember parts of the trauma.

5. Anger

Many people who have been traumatized feel anger and irritability. You may notice an unusual quickness to anger over seemingly unimportant things.

6. Guilt and Shame

Many people blame themselves for things they did or didn’t do. Feeling guilty about the trauma means that you are taking responsibility for what occurred, which is rarely accurate and rarely is one person singly responsible for an event.

7. Grief and Depression

This can include feeling down, sad, hopeless, or despairing. You may cry more often. You may lose interest in people and activities you used to enjoy. You may also feel that plans you had for the future don’t seem to matter anymore or that life isn’t worth living. These feelings can lead to thoughts of wishing you were dead or doing something to hurt yourself. Because experiencing trauma can change so much of how you see the world and yourself, it makes sense to feel sad and to grieve.

8. Negativity

Self-image and views of the world often become more negative after a trauma. Many people see themselves as more negative overall after the trauma. It is also very common to see others more negatively and to feel that you can’t trust anyone. If you used to think about the world as a safe place, experiences of trauma may suddenly make you think that the world is very dangerous.

9. Changes in intimacy and Sexual Relationships

Many people find it difficult to feel sexual or have sexual relationships. The opposite can also be true, where sex is used as a means to “feel something,” to prove one’s ability to make a connection, or to distract the mind from the intrusive negative thoughts and feelings.

10. Alcohol and Drug Misuse

Some people increase their use of alcohol or drugs after a trauma. There is nothing wrong with responsible drinking, but if your use of alcohol or drugs has increased as a result of your traumatic experience or is being used for a purpose like being able to sleep, it can slow down your recovery and cause problems of its own.