

## Emotional Responses to Trauma

---

People who experience a trauma tend to go through predictable phases. The phases usually occur in the following order, but may appear in any sequence.

**SHOCK:** can last from a few hours to one week. This can result in feeling immobilization; such as you can't remember simple things like your own telephone number, where your keys are kept, what time it is, etc. Shock is followed by denial. You don't really believe what is happening or has happened. Often you deny the fact that you were frightened and/or anxious.

**IMPACT:** starts sometime after the incident and can last up to two weeks. This is characterized by anger, sometimes directed towards your employer, fellow employees, police, or just society in general. The anger is usually dependent on what happened. In this phase you question yourself on how well you handled the situation and such self questions as, "Did I do the right thing?" This is the "what if" time when you think about what could have happened, or how you might have reacted differently. These self-doubts are common and expected. Another frequent occurrence in this impact phase is the onset of depression. You can give in to feelings of hopelessness and impotence, unable to think of positive outcomes, see yourself as a helpless victim, and blame yourself for poor judgment and bad decisions.

**RESOLUTION:** may go on for up to two months. The first step is realizing that you probably did a good job with the "incident". The last step is one of acceptance. You really understand what has happened and that fear is human. You also stop second guessing yourself or blaming yourself or others.

If you have had a medical problem such as gastrointestinal disorder, hypertension, diabetes, seizure disorders, etc., be particularly aware of any changes in these medical conditions and seek medical evaluation immediately. A certain amount of emotional distress is common after a trauma. If the anxiety, fear at work, depression, or sleep disorders continue for more than a few days you should seek professional assistance to help you with these difficulties. Do not be alone immediately following the incident. Avoid alcohol or other drugs that are not prescribed.

Dreaming about the incident is common, but should go away in a couple of weeks. There may be times where you think or feel that the incident is reoccurring, something like a "mini-flashback."

You should talk about the experience with family and friends, and if possible with people who were there. The more you are able to talk about what happened with people who understand, the sooner the difficulties will pass and the associated problems will diminish.



Over the next month you will experience **normal** reactions to the kind of experience you've had which may include:

## PHYSICAL REACTIONS

Fatigue  
Insomnia (which may turn into hypersomnia)

Exhaustion  
Health problems (such as change in appetite, headaches, digestive problems)

## BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS

Hyperactivity  
Difficulty with concentration  
Inability to attach importance to anything other than the incident  
Flashbacks

Underactivity  
Nightmares  
Startle reactions  
Memory disturbance  
Isolating

## PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTIONS

Fear  
Guilt  
Emotional sensitivity  
Anger-which may be manifest by: scapegoating, irritability, frustration with bureaucracy, violent fantasies.

Anxiety  
Depression  
Feelings of helplessness  
Amnesia for the event

These normal reactions, although painful, are part of the healing process. The feelings you experience may be uncomfortable, but there are things you can do to feel more whole.

### Things to Try:

- **WITHIN THE FIRST 24-48 HOURS**, periods of strenuous physical exercise alternated with relaxation will alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Structure your time - keep busy.
- You're normal and having normal reactions - don't label yourself crazy.
- Talk to people - talk is the most healing medicine.
- Be aware of numbing the pain with overuse of drugs or alcohol, you don't need to complicate this with a substance abuse problem.
- Reach out - people do care.
- Keep your lives as normal as possible.
- Spend time with others.
- Help your coworkers as much as possible by sharing feelings and checking out how they're doing
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share your feelings with others.
- Keep a journal; write your way through those sleepless hours.
- Do things that feel good to you.
- Realize those around you are under stress.
- The Nutrition Almanac recommends supplementing your diet with Vitamin C, Vitamin B2, Vitamin B6, Calcium and Magnesium.

- 1. Presence.** Just be there. It is not so important what you say. But the mere fact that you are present can make a profound difference. Be handy with tissues, listening, sharing, making eye contact, holding hands, a gentle hug. All of these non-verbal things give the message of I am here and I acknowledge your pain and suffering. Be sensitive to the mourning period. Keeping checking in 5, 6, 9 months later, they may still need you.
- 2. Food.** While grieving, most people tend to starve themselves. Food that is high in nutrients and easy to eat is the best. Wholesome finger foods, like fruits, vegetables or chicken. Try for things that are quick to eat, clean, and show you care. Remember to ask about or even follow your loved ones' eating habits. Chances are they will not remember when or what they ate last.
- 3. Support for Decisions.** Mourners are typically depressed people. When we are depressed we do not tend to make great decisions. We simply don't care to do so. Try to put off big decisions as much as possible. For those that cannot be put off, muster as much support as possible in order to make sure the decision is made properly. Try to get a designated spokesperson if possible.
- 4. Intuition.** Use that intuition. Chances are that if you believe your loved one is sinking into deep depression over their loss, they probably are. If you think they are not eating, sleeping well or their coping skills are nonexistent, you are probably correct. Pay attention to *EVERYTHING* in order to better assist their recovery period.
- 5. Listening.** While we grieve we have huge mood swings going from complete shock, inability to respond to talking nonstop. When your loved one begins to share, whatever they share, just listen and keep listening. Keep them talking while they are capable of it. Whether it makes sense to you or not does not matter, their mind is processing the reality of their situation. Talking is healing.
- 6. Giving.** Whether you give time, food, flowers, money, or yourself. Giving to the mourner is critical. Sometimes just answering the phone can be too much for them. Simple tasks such as bill paying, opening mail, laundry, dishes, getting groceries, can be too overwhelming for your loved one. But be careful; let them know what you are doing so that you don't unwittingly cause more pain.
- 7. Let them cry.** Often we tell mourners not to cry. We do this because we hate to see them in pain, but we are also afraid of our own pain. Don't force them to hide their pain by rejecting them. The best thing you can do is comfort them, even cry with them. Whatever you do, don't make them stop!
- 8. Involvement.** We tend to want to shield our loved ones from pain. However, being a part of the process can help later when they are ready to heal. Also, if we shield them too much we may cause them even greater pain in the end. Also be prepared for them to reject being involved. Don't force them if they do not want to be involved in key decisions.
- 9. Wait to remove possessions.** This is a very sensitive area but can cause great pain. Sometimes in an effort to help our loved ones we become a master packer. Be very careful to get permission for everything you are packing away. Also be careful not to wait too long. Sometimes, a loss can cause someone to reject the movement of anything of the deceased. This may be a sign of deeper problems.
- 10. Poetry, song and scrapbooks.** Reading poetry, or singing songs of support, religion, and love often provide comfort to the grieving. Put together a scrapbook of special memories.

1. **Physical exercise.** Develop an exercise routine that is aerobic and fun. Stick to it more religiously when under high stress. This does more to reduce acute stress than anything else you can do.
2. **Eat regular, nutritional meals.** Foods low in fat, sodium and simple sugar and high in carbohydrates are the best. Eat as though you are in training. Mealtimes should be as stress free as possible.
3. **Supplement your diet with vitamins and minerals.** Your body uses up its B vitamins, C vitamins and calcium during stress; if your diet does not provide sufficient amounts of these, take supplements.
4. **Avoid excessive use of alcohol and caffeine.** Caffeine causes a stress response so it is not recommended when already under stress. Alcohol is a depressant and does not help you feel better.
5. **Post notes to yourself.** The memory is affected by stress so write reminders to yourself. When making appointments, write when they are and directions to them in your appointment book.
6. **Prepare for morning the night before.** Put things you need to take with you by the door. Decide what you're going to wear and be sure it's ready.
7. **Get up 15 minutes early.** This gives you time for unforeseen things.
8. **Anticipate your needs.** Stop for gas before you really need it. Keep cash and coins on hand.
9. **Allow extra time to get where you need to go.** This way, if there are traffic delays you will not increase your stress.
10. **Walk everywhere you can.** It's good exercise and it gives you the opportunity to smell the flowers.
11. **Schedule quiet times.** Especially helpful is quiet just before bed and first thing in the morning. In addition, some quiet time during the day may be helpful.
12. **Keep your sense of humor.** Seeing the humor in a situation will help keep your stress low.
13. **Relax your standards.** You don't have to do everything perfectly.
14. **Find a serene place of your own.** Even if it's just a comfortable chair in a corner.
15. **Change your perspective.** Ask yourself what this all matters in the march of the universe.
16. **Take advantage of your body rhythms.** Schedule your most difficult tasks for your peak hours and less difficult tasks for other times.
17. **Have fun.** We can't be serious all of the time.
18. **Say "no more" often.** You need to pick the activities on which you want to spend your life energy.
19. **Reward yourself after stressful activities.** Relax with a book, listen to music, have a special lunch or take a long, leisurely bath.
20. **Spend time with others.** Preferably with others not involved in your work.
21. **Keep a journal.** Writing down inner thoughts is a way of release, as well as providing a journal for later contemplation.
22. **Get plenty of rest.** Schedule extra sleep time during times of stress. When you can't sleep, get up and do something non-stimulating.
23. **Don't make big life changes.** Stressful times are not the time to change everything.
24. **Keep schedules as normal as possible.** The semblance of routine helps.
25. **Don't give yourself negative labels.** You are not "losing it," you are reacting to stress in a normal way.