

Frequently Asked Questions in the Aftermath of a Traumatic Event

What is a normal response after one experiences a traumatic event?

People respond to traumatic events differently. Most people overcome these events without the need for professional intervention. It is “normal” to feel anxious, angry, fearful, or sadness immediately after the event.

How can one distinguish a normal response from one that may require assessment by a trained professional?

Most symptoms resolve spontaneously after a couple of days. Those that persist and/or worsen after a couple of days may indicate a more serious problem. Most serious problems are clinically called “stress disorders (formally called Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Stress Disorder).” If this is a concern, contacting a trained mental health professional for assessment is paramount.

Does any event cause a “stress disorder?”

No. The traumatic event must involve actual or threatened death, or serious physical harm (i.e., classically rape, natural disasters, military combat) out of the ordinary human experience. It can also occur from witnessing such an event. In addition the victim must experience intense fear, horror, and/or hopelessness.

What specific symptoms may be manifested?

Depending on the severity of the traumatic event, anywhere from one quarter to one half of those exposed to a traumatic event may develop psychological problems. These include:

- Becoming emotionally numb and/or unresponsive after the event. (i.e., looking like you are in a daze).
- Forgetting or blocking out certain aspects of the event (i.e., a victim of rape may be unable to clearly articulate the event to law enforcement, or be unable to remember key facts).
- Re-living the trauma in dreams or with intrusive thoughts or imagery. This commonly causes sleep disturbance and inability to concentrate respectively.
- Inability to focus and perform tasks that in the past posed no difficulty. (i.e., work or school performance may suffer as a result).
- Social isolation.
- There is avoidance of potential reminders of the event (i.e. witnessing a plane crash may cause one to avoid taking family vacations where air travel is required).
- Emotional distress may also be manifested as low frustration tolerance, becoming easily irritated over seemingly minor issues, or becoming easily frightened by sudden sounds or people.
- Some become extremely aware of their surroundings.
- Some develop physical symptoms such as pacing, restlessness, or in some cases unexplained “aches and pains,” fatigue, sweating, chills, or weakness.

When do the symptoms develop?

Feelings of distress, anger, guilt, etc. can develop at any time and are normal within days of the traumatic event. More severe and /or persistent symptoms can occur weeks or months after the event.

Are other conditions possible?

Yes. About one-half of those suffering from stress disorders abuse drugs and /or alcohol. This is likely a means to avoid reminders of the trauma and to cope with the symptoms associated with the trauma. Other common conditions include clinical depression or other anxiety problems (i.e. someone witnessing the devastation of a massive tornado may develop fears of storms, lightening, or other reminders of the tornado).

How are these conditions treated?

For minor cases, support and understanding from family and friends may be sufficient. Professional support groups are also effective for victims. Family and friends, and others providing support may also benefit from these groups. More serious cases require assessment by trained mental health professionals. Other possible interventions include medications, individual therapy, and in extreme cases hospitalization. Problems with drug and alcohol addiction should be treated proactively as well.

Do people recover from these events?

Yes. Most people recover completely spontaneously (or with minor interventions mentioned above). Even for more severe cases, most people recover to lead productive lives. More severe cases may require longer periods of treatment. Setbacks may occur if treatment is delayed. Therefore it is critical to have proper assessment and intervention as soon as symptoms develop.