



Common responses to trauma



It is very normal and common for people to experience emotional stress reactions when they have experienced a traumatic event. **Strong emotional or physical reactions are a normal response** to a stressful experience and are part of the body's normal coping and processing mechanisms. Sometimes the emotional stress reactions appear straight after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. In some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear. The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days and generally resolve after a few weeks.

With some good self-care strategies, and with the understanding and the support of your family, friends, and your broader support network, **stress reactions usually pass fairly quickly**. Where appropriate, you may like to consider what support you may receive from your employer, community and sporting groups and/or education provider. Sometimes it may take a little longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event. Occasionally, the traumatic event or reaction is so painful that professional assistance from a counsellor may be necessary. **This does not imply weakness**; it simply indicates that the trauma was just too powerful to manage without help. Some common responses to trauma are detailed below.

Physical signs

Fatigue, nausea, muscle tremors, twitches, chest pain*, difficulty breathing*, elevated blood pressure, rapid heart rate, thirst, visual difficulties, vomiting, grinding teeth, weakness, dizziness, profuse sweating, fainting, chills, shock symptoms*

Cognitive signs

Blaming, confusion, poor attention/concentration, poor decision making, heightened or lowered sense of alertness, memory problems, hypervigilance, difficulty identifying familiar objects/people, increased/decreased awareness of surroundings, poor problem solving/abstract thinking, loss of place and time, flashbacks, disturbed/intrusive thoughts, nightmares, suicidal thoughts*

Emotional signs

Anxiety, guilt, grief, denial, severe panic (rare), emotional shock, fear, uncertainty, loss of emotional control, depression, apprehension, inappropriate emotional response, constant worry, feeling overwhelmed, intense anger, irritability, agitation, crying

Behavioural signs

Change in activity/speech patterns, withdrawal, emotional outbursts, suspiciousness, loss/increase in appetite, excessive alcohol consumption, anti-social acts, pacing, non-specific bodily complaints/pains, erratic movements, changes in sexual functioning, startled reflex intensified, hyperalert to surroundings, increase/decrease in sleep or change in sleep pattern, increase/decrease in exercise, not participating in usual activities

* Please seek urgent medical assistance if you experience these symptoms





What can I do to help myself?

- Rest if fatigued
- Spend with family and friends
- Try not to fight recurring thoughts, dreams and flashbacks
- Accept that you are reacting normally
- Do some relaxation and or grounding exercises and activities
- Arrange your day to include time alone, or in the company of someone that can relate to you
- Maintain your usual schedule/routine as much as possible
- Eat balanced meals regularly. Eating a little, often may help
- Do some physical exercise, particularly in the first few days (check with your GP first if you have difficulty exercising)
- Express your feelings as they arise - even if you just write them down
- Talk to people who care about you, and make you feel safe
- Avoid excessive use of alcohol, cigarettes, caffeine and other drugs
- Do activities that you enjoy

How can friends and family can help?

- Listen carefully
- Offer assistance and support
- Give some private alone time
- Don't take reactions and responses personally
- Don't tell them what to do or judge
- Don't say things like "it could have been worse", or that they "should be over it by now" - these comments are not helpful
- Tell them that you want to understand, and that you are sorry that they experienced a traumatic event

When to seek professional help

- If you feel you are struggling with the intense feelings or physical sensations
- If after a period of time you continue to feel numb and empty, and are concerned about these feelings
- If you continue to have nightmares or poor sleep
- If you feel you don't have the support you need
- If your relationships seems to be suffering
- If you smoke, drink or take drugs to excess since the trauma
- If your work performance suffers
- If you are feeling "burned-out"

For more information or for further support, you can call Gippsland CASA on (03) 5134 3922.



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