

COMMON REACTIONS TO TRAUMA

These information sheets, adapted from Foa et al., can be given directly to the trauma survivor

A trauma is an emotional shock. I know that you are feeling very distressed right now and I want to go over with you the reactions that you are having because of the trauma. There are common reactions to traumatic experiences, although each person responds in her/his own unique way. You may find that you have experienced many of these reactions. You are also likely to find out that you have experienced or are experiencing some of these reactions more intensely than others.

1. The primary reactions people experience after a trauma are fear and anxiety. Sometimes your feelings of anxiety may be a result of being reminded of the trauma, at other times they may feel to you as if they come out of the blue. The feelings of anxiety and fear that you are experiencing can be understood as reactions to a dangerous and life-threatening situation. You may experience changes in your body, your feelings, and your thoughts because your view of the world and your perception about your safety have changed as a result of the trauma.

Certain **triggers** and **cues** may remind you of the trauma and activate your fears. These triggers may be certain times of the day, certain places, men approaching you, an argument with someone you care about, a certain smell, or a noise. Typically, after a trauma, fear and anxiety are experienced in two primary ways:

- 1) continuing to re-experience memories of the trauma
- 2) feeling aroused and jumpy

A common strategy people use to alleviate the anxiety and distress associated with a trauma is to try to avoid places, people, or other reminders of the trauma or to try to distract themselves. I want you to pay attention to the changes that you are experiencing in your body, your feelings and thoughts that have resulted from the trauma.

2. People who have been traumatized often **re-experience** the trauma. You may find that you are having flashbacks when visual pictures of the assailant's face or some other aspect of the trauma suddenly pops into your mind. Sometimes the flashback may be so vivid that you might feel as if the trauma is actually occurring again. These experiences are intrusive and you probably feel that you don't have any control over what you are feeling, thinking, and experiencing during the day or at night.

You may also find that you are re-experiencing the trauma through **nightmares**. You may also re-experience the trauma emotionally or cognitively without having a flashback or nightmare.

3. You may also find that you are having **trouble concentrating**. This is another common experience that results from a trauma. It is frustrating and upsetting to be unable to concentrate, remember, and pay attention to what is going on around you. This experience also leads to a **feeling that you are not in control of your mind or a feeling that you are going crazy**. It is important to remember that these reactions are temporary. Difficulties concentrating are due to intrusive and distressing feelings and memories about the trauma. In an attempt to understand and digest what happened to you, your mind is constantly going over this material, bringing it back up, chewing on it, and trying to digest it.

4. Another common reaction to trauma is **arousal**; that is, agitation, feeling jittery, feeling **overly alert**, trembling, being **easily startled**, and having trouble sleeping.

Feeling tense and jumpy all the time may also lead to feelings of **irritability**, especially if you are not getting enough sleep. These changes in your body are the result of fear. Animals and people have several potential reactions to being startled, traumatized, or threatened. One reaction to danger is to **freeze**. You may have seen a cat that is being approached by a dog crouch down and be very still when it is afraid. A second possible reaction to being threatened is to **run away** or **flee**. A third reaction is to **fight**. The fleeing or fighting responses require a burst of adrenaline to mobilize your body and help it respond adequately to a dangerous situation.

As a result of the trauma, you have realized that there is danger in the world and you want to be ready for it. Your body is in a constant state of preparedness and arousal, so you can feel pumped and ready to respond immediately to a dangerous situation.

5. You may find that you are physically or emotionally, **avoiding** people, places, or things that remind you of the trauma. This avoidance is a strategy to protect yourself from situations that you may feel have become dangerous, and thoughts and feelings that are overwhelming and distressing.

Sometimes the desire to avoid memories and feelings about the trauma may be so intense that you might find that you have forgotten important aspects of what happened during the trauma. Another common strategy to avoid painful feelings and thoughts about the trauma is **emotional numbness**.

6. Another common reaction to trauma is **sadness** and **a sense of feeling down or depressed**. You may have feelings of hopelessness and despair, frequent crying spells, and sometimes even thoughts of hurting yourself and suicide. A **loss of interest** in the people and activities that you once found pleasurable is often associated with a trauma. Nothing may seem fun to you anymore. You may also feel that life isn't worth living and that plans you had made for the future do not seem important any longer.

7. During a trauma, you may have been threatened and forced to participate in acts against their will. You were violated. During the trauma, you may have felt as if you had **no control** over your feelings, your body, and your life. Sometimes the feelings of loss of control may be so intense that you may feel as if you are "**going crazy**" or "**losing it**".

8. Feelings of **guilt** and **shame** may be present. Guilt and shame may be related to something you did or did not do to survive the trauma. It is common to second guess your reactions and blame yourself for what you did or did not do.

Many people feel ashamed after a trauma if they have been forced to do something they would not do under other circumstances. Sometimes people believe that if they had fought off their assailant, or had been more passive, that their trauma would not have been so bad. Feeling guilty about what happened to you means that you are holding yourself responsible for your assailant's reactions. These feelings of guilt can lead to feelings of helplessness, depression, and negative thoughts about yourself.

Blame can also come from society, friends, family, and acquaintances because many times people place responsibility on the person who has been hurt.

9. A feeling of **anger** is also a common reaction to trauma. The anger is mostly directed at the assailant for causing you physical injury, for violating you, for abusing you, or for stealing something of yours. But, feelings of anger may be also stirred up in the presence of people who remind you of the assailant or even strangers.

Sometimes you may find that you are so **angry** that you want to hit someone or swear; and if you are not used to feeling angry you may not recognize or know how to handle these angry feelings.

Many people also direct the anger towards themselves for something that they did or did not do during the trauma. These feelings of anger directed at the self may lead to feelings of blame, guilt, helplessness, and depression.

Many people also find that they are experiencing anger and irritability towards those people that they love the most: family, friends, their partners, and their children.

Sometimes you might **lose your temper** with the people who are most dear to you. This may be confusing since you may not understand why you are most angry and irritable with those you care about most. While closeness with others may feel good, it also increases the opportunity for feelings of intimacy, dependency, and vulnerability and helplessness. Having those feelings may make you feel angry and irritable because they remind you of the trauma.

10. Self-image can also suffer as a result of a trauma. You may tell yourself, "I am a bad person and bad things happen to me," or "If I had not been so weak or stupid, this would not have happened to me, or I should have been tougher".

11. People who are traumatized can develop **negative thoughts** about other people and life events. For many people the safe and rewarding world that they have been familiar with suddenly becomes a very dangerous place. They may feel that they **cannot trust anyone**. You may feel this way yourself. Or, if you have had previous negative experiences and thoughts about the world, the trauma may confirm your notion that the "world is a dangerous place" and "no one can be trusted".

We often hear people who tell us that the trauma has changed them completely. They say "before the trauma I was not afraid of anything. I could cope with any kind of stress no matter how difficult the situation was, and get along with others. And now I am afraid of my shadow and I cannot cope even with minor problems".

Some people tell us "the trauma was the last straw"; "I knew I always felt that I could not trust myself" or "I am the kind of person that cannot handle even slight difficulties"

12. Finally, as a result of this recent trauma, you may be reminded of your **past experiences**. These negative memories may be stirred up as a result of a recent trauma and it may be difficult for you to think of any other situations or experiences that are not negative. In fact, it may be very difficult to believe that you will ever feel happy again or have pleasant experiences, but you will. It is important for you to know that our memories are associated because of the way our minds organize information.

You may also suddenly recall memories that you had forgotten. These new memories may be as disturbing to you as the memory of your recent trauma. But it is possible to put these negative experiences behind you.

Some of these common reactions to a trauma are connected with each other. For some people, having a flashback may increase their concern about losing control of their lives and may even intensify their fears. In other words, the responses of being traumatized often interact with one another and cause the overall response to be more intense. Of all these normal reactions to trauma, fear is probably the most common and appears to be the most debilitating. In this program, we are going to focus on the fears and negative thoughts that you are having and that are directly related to your trauma.