

Reactions to Trauma: immediate and delayed

Immediate Emotional Reactions

Numbness and detachment
 Anxiety or severe fear
 Guilt (including survivor guilt)
 Exhilaration as a result of surviving
 Anger
 Sadness
 Helplessness
 Feeling unreal; depersonalization (e.g., feeling as if you are watching yourself)
 Disorientation
 Feeling out of control
 Denial
 Constriction of feelings
 Feeling overwhelmed

Delayed Emotional Reactions

Irritability and/or hostility
 Depression
 Mood swings, instability
 Anxiety (e.g., phobia, generalized anxiety)
 Fear of trauma recurrence
 Grief reactions
 Shame
 Feelings of fragility and/or vulnerability
 Emotional detachment from anything that requires emotional reactions (e.g., significant and/or family relationships, conversations about self, discussion of traumatic events or reactions to them)

Immediate Physical Reactions

Nausea and/or gastrointestinal distress
 Sweating or shivering
 Faintness
 Muscle tremors or uncontrollable shaking
 Elevated heartbeat, respiration, and blood pressure
 Extreme fatigue or exhaustion
 Greater startle responses
 Depersonalization

Delayed Physical Reactions

Sleep disturbances, nightmares
 Somatization (e.g., increased focus on and worry about body aches and pains)
 Appetite and digestive changes
 Lowered resistance to colds and infection
 Persistent fatigue
 Elevated cortisol levels
 Hyperarousal
 Long-term health effects including heart, liver, autoimmune, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease

Immediate Cognitive Reactions

Difficulty concentrating
 Rumination or racing thoughts (e.g., replaying the traumatic event over and over again)
 Distortion of time and space (e.g., traumatic event may be perceived as if it was happening in slow motion, or a few seconds can be perceived as minutes)
 Memory problems (e.g., not being able to recall important aspects of the trauma)
 Strong identification with victims

Delayed Cognitive Reactions

Intrusive memories or flashbacks
 Reactivation of previous traumatic events
 Self-blame
 Preoccupation with event
 Difficulty making decisions
 Magical thinking: belief that certain behaviors, including avoidant behavior, will protect against future trauma
 Belief that feelings or memories are dangerous
 Generalization of triggers (e.g., a person who experiences a home invasion during the daytime may avoid being alone during the day)
 Suicidal thinking

Immediate Behavioral Reactions

Startled reaction
 Restlessness
 Sleep and appetite disturbances
 Difficulty expressing oneself
 Argumentative behavior
 Increased use of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco
 Withdrawal and apathy
 Avoidant behaviors

Delayed Behavioral Reactions

Avoidance of event reminders
 Social relationship disturbances
 Decreased activity level
 Engagement in high-risk behaviors
 Increased use of alcohol and drugs
 Withdrawal

Immediate Existential Reactions
Intense use of prayer
Restoration of faith in the goodness of others (e.g., receiving help from others)
Loss of self-efficacy
Despair about humanity, particularly if the event was intentional
Immediate disruption of life assumptions (e.g., fairness, safety, goodness, predictability of life)

Delayed Existential Reactions
Questioning (e.g., "Why me?")
Increased cynicism, disillusionment
Increased self-confidence (e.g., "If I can survive this, I can survive anything")
Loss of purpose
Renewed faith
Hopelessness
Reestablishing priorities
Redefining meaning and importance of life
Reworking life's assumptions to accommodate the trauma (e.g., taking a self-defense class to re-establish a sense of safety)