Common Reactions After A Traumatic Event

When we or someone we know experiences a traumatic event or crisis, our body and brain go into high alert. Stress chemicals and hormones are released to prepare us to cope with the threat.

The stress chemicals that are released during this process trigger physical and mental reactions. For example, our breathing, heart rate, and blood sugar increase. The "threat center" of our brain takes over.

This stress response process is designed to protect us. It does a very good job at that. However, experiencing these sorts of reactions can feel very uncomfortable, intense, and even overwhelming.

Because of all the automatic reactions that take place in response to stress chemicals, it is extremely common for people to experience a wide range of emotional and physical symptoms of stress during and after traumatic events. Trauma and stress reactions may appear immediately after the event, or some time later. They may last for a few days, a few weeks, or even longer.

This tip sheet shares some common trauma and stress reactions.

Feeling extra jumpy, alert, anxious, sensitive, emotional, or irritable: When we are already stressed, we react more quickly and intensely any additional threats or stressors.

Difficulty relaxing and sleeping: Stress chemicals designed to prepare us for action make it hard to wind down, relax and sleep well. We may have dreams or nightmares because our brain is working hard to process the stressful events.

Difficulty focusing and concentrating: Our stress response is designed to focus us on the immediate threat. This makes it hard to focus on anything else, and to concentrate on normal responsibilities such as work tasks.

Stomach upsets and appetite changes: Our digestive system slows down when we are stressed so we can experience things like nausea, diarrhea, constipation, heartburn, and changes in appetite.

Muscle aches and strains: Stress chemicals prepare our muscles to act (fight or flee). Especially if we do not *use* our muscles to respond to stress, they can get tight and tense and we become more prone to injury.

Difficulty planning, thinking logically, and making decisions: When the "threat center" of our brain takes over, our prefrontal cortex (which is responsible for local and big-picture thinking and making rational decisions) cannot function the way it normally does.

Avoiding thoughts, feelings or situations related to the event: Because thoughts about the event often raise complicated and intense feelings, we may find ourselves trying to avoid reminders of the event.

Withdrawing from family and friends: When we are struggling with intense thoughts and feelings it is common to withdraw from family and friends and to change our normal communication patterns and other typical behavior.

Feeling guilty, helpless, hopeless, or disillusioned: After we or someone we care about are involved in a traumatic event it is common to feel guilty, helpless, or question our beliefs and assumptions related to justice, meaning, and the existence and nature of a divine being(s).

Getting sick more often: If the levels of stress chemicals and hormones released when we get stressed stay high for too long, they start interfering with some of our immune response (e.g., some white blood cells) and create a lowered immune response over time.

Increased consumption of alcohol and other substances: We can crave things like alcohol, nicotine, and food that temporarily help us feel better. Over time, we may start to increasingly rely on these temporary boosts.

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