

WHEN BAD THINGS HAPPEN

What You May Experience

Immediate Reactions

There are a wide variety of positive and negative reactions that people can experience during and immediately following severe stress. These include:

DOMAIN	NEGATIVE RESPONSES	POSITIVE RESPONSES
Cognitive	Confusion, disorientation, worry, intrusive thoughts and images, self-blame.	Determination and resolve, sharper perception, courage, optimism, faith
Emotional	Shock, sorrow, grief, sadness, fear, anger, numbness, irritability, guilt and shame.	Feeling involved, challenged, mobilized
Social	Extreme withdrawal, interpersonal conflict.	Social connectedness altruistic helping behaviors
Psychological	Fatigue headache, muscle tension, stomachache, increased heart rate, exaggerated startle response, difficulties sleeping.	Alertness, readiness to respond, increased energy

Common negative reactions that may continue include:

Intrusive reactions

- Distressing thoughts or images of the event while awake or dreaming
- Upsetting emotional or physical reactions to reminders of the experience
- Feeling like the experience is happening all over again (“flashback”)

Avoidance and withdrawal reactions

- Avoid talking, thinking, and having feelings about the traumatic event
- Avoid reminders of the event (places and people connected to what happened)
- Restricted emotions; feeling numb
- Feelings of detachment and estrangement from others; social withdrawal
- Loss of interest in usually pleasurable activities

Physical arousal reactions

- Constantly being ‘on the lookout’ for danger, startling easily or being jumpy
- Irritability or outbursts of anger, feeling “on edge”
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep; problems concentrating or paying attention

Reactions to trauma and loss reminders

- Reactions to places, people, sights, sounds, smells, and feelings that are reminders of the event
- Reminders can bring on distressing mental images thoughts, and emotional/physical reactions

Positive changes in priorities, worldview, and expectations

- Enhanced appreciation that family and friends are precious and important
- Meeting the challenge of addressing difficulties (by taking positive action steps, changing the focus of thoughts, using humor, acceptance)
- Shifting expectations about what to expect from day-to-day and about what is considered a “good day”
- Shifting priorities to focus more on quality time with family and friends
- Increased commitment to self, family, friends, and spiritual/religious faith

WHAT HELPS

Talking to another person for support or spending time with others

Focusing on something practical that you can do right now to manage the situation better

Engaging in positive distracting activities (sports, hobbies, reading)

Using relaxation methods, (breathing exercises, meditation, calming self-talk, soothing music)

Getting adequate rest and eating healthy meals

Participating in a support group

Trying to maintain a normal schedule

Exercising in moderation

Scheduling pleasant activities

Keeping a journal

Taking breaks

Seeking counseling

Reminiscing about a loved one who has died



WHAT DOESN'T HELP

Using alcohol or drugs to cope

Working too much

Extreme avoidance of thinking or talking about the event or a death of a loved one

Extreme withdrawal from family or friends

Violence or conflict

Not taking care of yourself

Overeating or failing to eat

Doing risky things (driving recklessly, substance abuse, not taking adequate precautions)

Excessive television or computer games

Withdrawing from pleasant activities

Blaming others

