

## Common, normal reactions to a traumatic event

Emotional	
<b>Shock</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disbelief</li> <li>• Unreal and dreamlike</li> <li>• Numbness</li> <li>• Slow realisation of what has happened</li> </ul>	<b>Mood swings</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Changeable moods for no apparent reason</li> <li>• Feelings of depression, anxiety, irritability, tearfulness or anger</li> </ul>
<b>Fears</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of damage to yourself or death</li> <li>• Of the event happening again</li> <li>• Of intense vulnerability</li> <li>• Of being alone</li> <li>• Of breaking down or losing control</li> </ul>	<b>Anger</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Towards those who caused or allowed the event to happen</li> <li>• At the injustice and the senselessness of it all</li> <li>• At the shame and indignities</li> <li>• At the lack of understanding by others</li> <li>• At being singled out – why me?</li> <li>• Generalised anger and irritability</li> </ul>
<b>Anxiety</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• About the place or reminders of the event</li> <li>• About the dark</li> <li>• About being alone</li> <li>• About crowded places</li> <li>• About similar surroundings to where the event occurred</li> </ul>	<b>Shame</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For having been exposed as helpless, emotional and needing others</li> <li>• For not having reacted as you would have wished</li> <li>• For being made to feel vulnerable, powerless or out of control</li> </ul>
<b>Sadness</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For the loss of the belief that the world is a safe and predictable place</li> </ul>	<b>Guilt</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• About not doing anything to stop it</li> <li>• About the relief that you were not directly involved</li> <li>• About not being there</li> <li>• About not having done enough to prevent it</li> </ul>

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Behavioural	Cognitive
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Change in level of sexual desire</li> <li>• Change of appetite/drinking/smoking habits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty concentrating</li> <li>• Difficulty remembering, especially parts of the event</li> <li>• “If only” questions e.g. “If only... I hadn’t given him so much... I hadn’t taken the day off”</li> <li>• Questions about whether you did the right thing</li> <li>• “What if” questions</li> <li>• Attempts to shut out thoughts or memories of the incident</li> </ul>
<b>Apprehension</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More easily startled</li> <li>• Generally agitated physically and mentally</li> <li>• More aware of loud noises</li> <li>• Heightened awareness of your environment</li> </ul>	<b>Confusion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Because the world has changed for you</li> <li>• Because of unfamiliar feelings</li> <li>• Because something from the past is troubling you again (it is not unusual for unresolved issues from past events to surface at a time like this)</li> </ul>
<b>Sleep disturbances</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Difficulty getting to sleep, staying asleep or waking early due to repetitive thoughts or increased anxiety</li> </ul>	<b>Flashbacks</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At unpredictable times and places</li> </ul>
<b>Avoidance</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of situations that remind you of the event</li> <li>• Of being alone or being in crowded places</li> <li>• Of the place where the event occurred</li> </ul>	

## Physical

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tiredness</li> <li>• Dizziness</li> <li>• Palpitations</li> <li>• Shaking</li> <li>• Difficulty in breathing</li> <li>• Choking in the throat and chest</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nausea</li> <li>• Diarrhoea or constipation</li> <li>• Muscle tension that may lead to pain e.g. headaches, neck and back aches, menstrual disorders, chest pain</li> </ul>
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## What can I do?

- **Give yourself time:** It takes weeks or months to accept what has happened and to learn to live with it. You need to grieve for your loss.
- **Be involved with others:** Going to funerals or memorial services may help you to come to terms with what has happened. It can help to spend time with others who have been through the same experience as you.
- **Talk it over:** Let yourself think about the trauma and talk about it with others. If you cry when you talk, it's natural and usually helpful. Take things at a pace that you feel comfortable with.
- **Take some time for yourself:** At times you may want to be alone or just with those close to you. Sometimes you will want to be with other people, but not to talk about what has happened. This can also be part of the healing process.
- **Get into a routine:** Even if you don't feel much like eating, try to have regular meals and to eat a balanced diet. Taking some exercise can help - but start gently.
- **Take care:** After a trauma, people are more likely to have accidents. Be careful around the home and when you are driving.
- **Do not:** bottle up your feelings; take on too much; make major life changes; think you are abnormal, use excessive alcohol or other drugs to help you cope.

**Children** react in a variety of ways, depending on their age:

- Become easily upset, cry or whine more often
- Get angry, act out or get into trouble
- Be afraid to sleep alone, have nightmares or difficulty falling asleep
- Be afraid to be left alone or out of their parent's sight

Withdrawal, aggressive behaviours (fighting, hitting, etc.), trouble at school, problems separating from parents or going to sleep may mean they need extra help.

Family and friends will probably be able to see you through this difficult time. However, you may need to seek additional help (e.g. from your GP or phone help line) if:

- you have no one to share your feelings with
- you can't handle your feelings and feel overwhelmed by sadness, anxiety, or nervousness
- you feel that you are not returning to normal after six-eight weeks
- you have nightmares and cannot sleep
- you are getting on badly with those close to you
- you stay away from other people more and more
- your work is suffering
- those around you suggest you seek help
- you have accidents

*Local contact:*

*Please contact your local medical centre or rural clinic for a referral to the PHO Brief Intervention Counselling team.*

*National 24 hour helplines:*

Health Line 0800 611 116  
Lifeline 0800 543 354

Victim Support 0800 842 846  
Youthline 0800 376 633



## Coping after a Traumatic Event

**A booklet of reactions, feelings  
and tips for you.**