

Victim Reactions to Traumatic Events Handout

People who become victims of a stressful or life-threatening event or accident typically experience the event as an emotional shock. There are common reactions to this type of trauma or shock, but at the same time, each person responds in his/her own unique way.

Typical Responses

You may find, if you have been a victim, that you have experienced, or are currently experiencing, some or all of the common reactions below. You are likely to find that you have experienced, or are experiencing, different levels of intensity of some of these reactions.

1. **Fear response:** The most common reaction to a traumatic event is fear. At the time of the event, the overwhelming experience is fear—fear of being physically injured or even of being killed. For many people, the fear response (to certain sights, sounds, smells, thoughts, etc.) associated with the event persist for weeks, months, or even years. People who have been exposed to trauma typically avoid anything which reminds them of the assault (places, situations, people, etc.). Some people become so fearful that they greatly restrict their activities, even to the point that they are unable to leave their homes or to be left alone.
2. **Loss of control:** After they experience a traumatic event, many people fear that they are losing control over their lives. They were not in control of their lives during the event, and this feeling of loss of control may then continue after the event.
3. **Flashbacks:** Victims may re-experience the event over and over in their thoughts and/or in their dreams. When this happens, it is almost as though the event is actually occurring again. This re-experience of the event is called a *flashback*.
4. **Trouble concentrating:** Traumatic event victims may find that they have trouble concentrating on things. It is as though they cannot keep their minds on what they are doing. This can be frustrating and add to the sense of loss of control.
5. **Guilty feelings:** Guilt, if present, may be related to what the victim had to do in order to survive the stressful event, or feeling that the event could have been avoided if the victim had done things differently. Sometimes, guilty feelings result from the fact that others may have been seriously harmed more than the victim him-/herself. This is referred to as *survivor's guilt*.
6. **Negative self-image:** Self-image frequently suffers as a result of a stressful or traumatic event.
7. **Depression:** Another common reaction to trauma is a sense of sadness, feeling “down,” or depression. The victim may feel hopelessness and despair, experience frequent crying spells, or even have suicidal thoughts. A loss of interest in activities and things that were previously enjoyable often accompanies these feelings of sadness. Nothing seems like it is fun anymore.

8. ***Disrupted relationships:*** It is not unusual, after experiencing a trauma, to see a disruption in relationships with others. This may be due, in part, to the withdrawn behavior that frequently accompanies sadness and depression. At the same time, the support of friends and family play an important role in the victim's recovery from the trauma of the event.

Some of these reactions are connected with each other. For some people, having flashbacks, for example, may increase their concern about losing control of their lives and may even intensify their fear responses. In other words, the responses to trauma often interact with one another and may cause the overall response to become more intense. Of these eight categories of reactions, fear is probably the most common and appears to be the most debilitating. For this reason, this handout will focus on this very normal and predictable response to trauma. We want to emphasize that, in fact, all eight of the reactions listed here are normal responses to a traumatic event.

Fear and Anxiety

Fear and anxiety are difficult to distinguish from each other. In general, fear usually has a specific object (person, place, situation, etc.) that is identified as the feared object. Anxiety (worry, uneasiness, distress, etc.), on the hand, is usually more vague. For example, weeks, even months, after a traumatic event, it is not uncommon for victims to describe a feeling of general uneasiness or jitteriness—a feeling that something bad is going to happen.

Victims of a trauma may experience both fear and anxiety. Long after the event, victims may continue to experience a fear response triggered by any number of reminders of the trauma. For example, the trigger, or stimulus, may be the situation or setting in which the event took place. In other words, anything which reminds you of the trauma may serve as a trigger for the fear response. Places, situations, smells, etc. are often avoided because these stimuli remind the victim of the trauma and trigger the fear reaction.

The Physical Reaction

People react to any kind of fearful situation on three different levels: physical, mental, and behavioral. Our physical reactions are automatic; we do not have to do anything on a conscious or intentional basis. When faced with danger (or anything we interpret as dangerous), our bodies automatically respond. For instance, our hearts begin to pound, our blood pressure increases, we breathe faster and harder, our muscles become tense, we may tremble, or feel flushed or suddenly cold. These kinds of physical reactions are the result of a flow of adrenalin, and is commonly referred to as a “fight or flight” response. When we perceive that we are being threatened, our bodies automatically get ready to either fight the threatening object or to run away from the threat.

Trauma victims first experienced this physical reaction to danger during the event itself. Weeks, months, or even years later, the victim may experience a similar physical reaction to reminders of the trauma.

The Mental Reaction

Sometimes it is not a physical reminder, but rather a thought or emotion, that triggers or stimulates a fear response. Certain people, places, things, or circumstances can trigger these thoughts. Other times, the thought simply enters the mind of the victims, apparently without any clear stimulus. For example, many victims report that pictures of the event flash through their mind, even when they don't want them to or when they try not to have the thought. These kinds of experiences—of having a frightening thought “invade” their mind—seems to be virtually uncontrollable at times and can certainly make it difficult to concentrate. This adds to the feeling many victims have of not being in control of their own lives. Furthermore, many people may have nightmares or “night terrors” (in which they wake up crying but cannot recall what they were dreaming about) related to the event. They feel that, even while asleep, they are not safe from frightening thoughts. These kinds of intrusive thoughts, images, and dreams may lead a victims to think they are “going crazy” since they does not seem to be able to control their minds.

It is very important to know that these reactions are not abnormal! Very stressful, traumatic events can often lead to these kinds of reactions.

The Behavioral Reaction

A third way trauma victims respond to the fear and anxiety associated with the traumatic event is on a behavioral level, where they try to control or avoid the fear response itself. In other words, they try to avoid the intense discomfort associated with the physical and mental aspects of fear and anxiety. They will go to great lengths to avoid people, places, things, or situations which remind them of the event. Once again, the victim may feel like he/she has lost some control over his/her life, and again, it is important to emphasize that these reactions are not abnormal.

Interactions

These physical, mental, and behavioral response to fear and anxiety may occur separately; often, however, they occur simultaneously and influence, or interact, with each other. For example, having thoughts, flashbacks, or dreams (mental reactions) about the traumatic event usually triggers a physical reactions, such as rapid breathing, increased heart rate, and muscle tension. These reactions, in turn, may lead to behaviors which help the victims avoid the stimuli that triggered the mental and physical reactions.

Summary

Typical responses to a traumatic event are one or more of the following:

- Fear responses to reminders of the event
- Feeling like you are losing control of your life or your mind
- Re-experiencing the event over and over again through flashbacks
- Problems concentrating and staying focused on the task at hand
- Guilty feelings
- Developing a negative self-image
- Depression
- Disruptions in close relationships

Fear and anxiety cause physical, mental, and behavioral reactions, all of which may lead the victim to feel as though he or she has no control over his or her life.

Most importantly, **all of these reactions are normal responses to the traumatic event you have experienced!**