

# 10 Common Reactions to Trauma

Below are some of the common reactions that people have after a trauma. Because everyone responds differently to traumatic events, you may have some of these reactions more than others, and some you may not have at all.



**1. Anxiety and fear.** Anxiety is a common and natural response to a dangerous situation. For many people it lasts long after the trauma ended. You may become anxious when you remember the trauma. But anxiety may also come from out of the blue. Triggers or cues that can cause anxiety may include places, times of day, certain smells or noises, or any situation that reminds you of the trauma.

**2. Re-experiencing of the trauma.** People often “re-experience” the traumatic event. For example, you may have unwanted thoughts of the trauma and find yourself unable to get rid of them. Some people have flashbacks, or very vivid images, which can feel as if the trauma is occurring again. Nightmares are also common. These symptoms occur because a traumatic experience is so shocking and so different from everyday experiences that you can’t fit it into what you know about the world. So in order to understand what happened, your mind keeps bringing the memory back, as if to better digest it and fit it in with your experiences.

**3. Increased vigilance.** This includes feeling “on guard,” jumpy, jittery, shaky, nervous, on edge, being easily startled, and having trouble concentrating or sleeping. Continuous vigilance can lead to impatience and irritability, especially if you’re not getting enough sleep. This reaction is due to the fight or flee response in your body, and is the way we protect ourselves against danger.

**4. Avoidance.** One of the most common ways of trying to manage PTSD symptoms is avoiding situations that remind you of the trauma, such as the place where it happened. Often, situations that are less directly related to the trauma are also avoided, such as going out in the evening if the trauma occurred at night, or going to crowded areas such as the grocery store, shopping mall or movie theatre.



**5. Anger.** Many people who have experienced a traumatic event feel angry. If you are not used to feeling angry, this may seem scary. It may be especially confusing to feel angry at those who are closest to you.



to think about the world as a safe place, the trauma may suddenly make you think that the world is very dangerous. If you had previous bad experiences, the trauma may convince you that the world is indeed dangerous and others are not to be trusted. These negative thoughts often make people feel they have been changed completely by the trauma. Relationships with others can become tense, and intimacy becomes more difficult as your trust decreases.

**6. Grief and depression.** This can include feeling down, sad or hopeless. You may cry more often. You may lose interest in people and activities that you used to enjoy. You may stay home and isolate yourself from friends. These feelings can lead to thoughts of wishing you were dead, or doing something to try to hurt or kill yourself. Because the trauma has changed so much of how you see the world and yourself, it makes sense to feel sad and to grieve for what you lost because of the traumatic experience.

**7. Guilt and shame.** Trauma may lead to feelings of guilt and shame. Many people blame themselves for things they did or didn't do to survive. For example, some assault survivors believe that they should have fought off an assailant, and blame themselves for the attack. Others who may have survived an event in which others perished feel that they should have been the one to die, or that they should have been able to somehow prevent the other person from dying.

**8. Negativity.** Self-image and views of the world often become more negative after a trauma. You may tell yourself, "If I hadn't been so weak this wouldn't have happened to me." Many people see themselves in a more negative light in general after the trauma ("I am a bad person and I deserved this"). It is also very common to see others more negatively, and to feel that you cannot trust anyone. If you used

**9. Decreased intimacy.** Sexual relationships may also suffer after a traumatic experience. Many people find it difficult to feel intimate or to have sexual relationships again. This is especially true for those who have been sexually assaulted, since in addition to the lack of trust, sex itself can be a reminder of the assault.



**10. Alcohol and drug use.** Many people increase their use of alcohol or other substances after a trauma. Often, they do this in an attempt to "self-medicate" or to block out painful memories, thoughts, or feelings related to the trauma. People with PTSD may have trouble sleeping or may have nightmares, and they may use alcohol or drugs to try to improve sleep or not remember their dreams. While it may seem to help in the short term, chronic use of alcohol or drugs will slow down (or prevent) your recovery from PTSD and will cause problems of its own.

— Adapted from *Oxford Clinical Psychology*