

Common Reactions to Trauma

Re-experiencing the Trauma

Trauma survivors may re-experience their trauma through thoughts, feelings, memories, and other means. Re-experiencing a trauma can be very distressing, and may trigger uncomfortable emotions such as fear, anger, or sadness.

- Nightmares
- Flashbacks (uncontrollable vivid images and memories of the trauma)
- Distressing thoughts and feelings about the trauma
- Emotional distress or physical responses after experiencing a trauma reminder

Avoidance of Trauma Reminders

Because reminders of a trauma can be so distressing, it is common for trauma survivors to use avoidance to control these reactions.

- Using drugs or alcohol to suppress uncomfortable thoughts and emotions
- Avoidance of activities related to the trauma
- Avoidance of people, places, or things related to the trauma
- Suppressing thoughts related to the trauma
- Avoidance of conversations about the trauma

Negative Thoughts or Feelings

Negative thoughts or feelings may begin or worsen after experiencing a trauma. Some of these thoughts and feelings might not seem to relate directly to the trauma.

- Excessive blame toward oneself or others related to the trauma
- Loss of interest in activities
- Feelings of isolation or disconnection from surroundings
- Difficulty experiencing positive feelings
- Loss of memory related to the trauma
- Excessive negative thoughts about oneself or the world

Hyperarousal

Reactivity, or a feeling of being “on edge”, may begin or worsen after experiencing a trauma. This category includes a broad range of physical and psychological symptoms.

- Becoming irritable, quick to anger, or aggressive
- Heightened startle reaction
- Difficulty concentrating
- Frequently scanning the environment or watching for trauma reminders
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feelings of anxiety, and related symptoms such as a racing heart, upset stomach, or headaches
- Risky or impulsive behaviors