

Handout 3

Common Reactions to Trauma

A traumatic experience is an emotional shock and may cause many emotional problems. This section describes some of the common reactions 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.

Remember, many changes after a trauma are normal. In fact, most people who directly experience a major trauma have severe reactions in the immediate aftermath, similar to yours. Many people then feel much better within 3 months after the event, but others recover more slowly, and some do not recover enough without help. Becoming more aware of the changes you have undergone since your trauma is the first step toward recovery.

Some of the most common problems after a trauma are described here.

Negative Emotion

One of the primary reactions that people experience after a trauma are *frequent negative emotions* including fear and anxiety, guilt, shame, or anger. Anxiety is a common and natural response to a dangerous situation. For many people, it lasts long after the trauma has ended. This happens when our views of the world and sense of safety have changed and become more negative. You may become anxious when you remember the trauma. In some people, guilt or shame may be the prominent emotions when they have had traumas in which they experienced or witnessed events that felt wrong, immoral, or personally violating. Feelings of anger may also be triggered by traumatic experiences that felt unjust or violating.

These upsetting thoughts and feelings are sometimes triggered by external events, but sometimes they seem to come on by themselves or out of the blue. *Triggers* or *cues* that can cause distress may include places, times of day, certain smells or noises, or any situation that reminds you of the trauma. As you begin to pay more attention to these times, you can discover the triggers for your distress. In this way, you may learn that some of your out-of-the-blue negative feelings are really triggered by things that remind you of your trauma.

Reexperiencing the Trauma

People who have been traumatized often reexperience 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, 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.

Increased Arousal

Another common response to trauma is increased arousal, which includes feeling jumpy, jittery, and shaky; being easily startled; and having trouble sleeping. You may also find that you are having trouble concentrating. This is another common experience that results from a trauma. Continuous arousal can lead to *impatience* and *irritability*, especially if you're not getting enough sleep. The arousal reactions are due to the fight or flight response in your body. The fight or flight response is how we protect ourselves against danger, and it also occurs in animals. When we protect ourselves from danger by fighting or running away, we need a lot more energy than usual, so our bodies pump out extra adrenaline to help us get the extra energy we need to survive.

People who have been traumatized often see the world as filled with danger, so their bodies are on constant alert, always ready to respond immediately to any attack. The problem is that increased arousal *is* useful in truly dangerous situations, such as if we find ourselves facing a tiger. But alertness becomes very uncomfortable when it continues for a long time even in safe situations. Another reaction to danger is to freeze, like a deer in the headlights, and this reaction can also occur during a trauma.

Avoidance

As has been discussed in earlier chapters, avoidance is a common way of managing trauma-related pain and distress. It is a strategy to protect yourself from situations you feel have become dangerous and from thoughts and feelings that are painful, overwhelming, or distressing. You may be avoiding situations that remind you of the trauma, such as activities or people that are related to the traumatic events. Often situations that are less directly related to the trauma are also avoided, such as going out after dark or being in crowded places. Another way to reduce discomfort is to try to push away painful thoughts and feelings. This can lead to feelings of *numbness*, where you find it difficult to have both fearful and pleasant or loving feelings. Some people feel that they have lost their ability to experience positive emotions like happiness, joy, or loving feelings. Sometimes the painful thoughts or feelings may be so intense that your mind just blocks them out altogether, and you may not remember parts of the trauma.

Anger and Irritability

Many people who have been traumatized feel angry and irritable. It may be especially confusing to feel angry at those who are closest to you. Sometimes people feel angry because of feeling irritable so often. Anger can also arise from a feeling that the world is not fair.

Guilt and Shame

People often experience changes in their thoughts and beliefs after a trauma. They may see the world as a very dangerous place or themselves as weak or bad. Trauma often leads to feelings of guilt and shame. Many people blame themselves for things they did or didn't do. For example, some assault survivors believe that they should have fought off an assailant, and they blame

themselves for the assault. Others feel that if they had not fought back they wouldn't have gotten hurt. A veteran may feel guilty for hitting an IED (a type of bomb) while he was driving that injured or killed a buddy. You may feel ashamed because during the trauma you acted in ways that you would not otherwise have done. Sometimes, other people may blame you for the trauma.

Feeling guilty about the trauma means that you are taking responsibility for what occurred. While this may make you feel somewhat more in control, it can also lead to feelings of helplessness and depression.

Grief and Depression

Other common reactions to trauma include grief and depression, such as feeling down, sad, hopeless, or despairing. You may cry more often. Trauma survivors often feel a sense of grief for what they have lost or for who they were before the trauma occurred. Sometimes grieving is associated with a loss of the ability to control what has happened to you or to your body, or the loss of your sense of safety. You may lose interest in people and activities you used to enjoy. You may feel that plans you had for the future don't seem to matter anymore or that life isn't worth living. These feelings can lead to thoughts of wishing you were dead or doing something to hurt or try to 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 trauma.

Self-Image and Views of Other People

How you see yourself and others often become more negative after a trauma. You may tell yourself, "If I hadn't been so weak or stupid, this wouldn't have happened to me." Many people see themselves as more negative overall after the trauma ("I am a bad person and deserved this" or "other people experience the same trauma but they remain strong and go on in life").

It is very common to see others more negatively and to feel that you can't *trust* anyone. If you used 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 dangerous and others aren't to be trusted. These negative thoughts often make people feel that they have been changed completely by the trauma. Relationships with others can become tense, and it may be difficult to become intimate with people as your trust decreases.

People sometimes begin to behave in a reckless or self-destructive manner after a trauma. This may include driving too fast, making poor decisions, taking excessive risks. Have you been engaging in reckless or risky behavior? Are friends or family worried about you?

It is not unusual to have disruptions in relationships with other people after a traumatic experience, or to struggle with trusting and feeling close with others. Sexual relationships may suffer after a traumatic experience. Many people find it difficult to feel sexual or have sexual relationships. This is especially true for those who have been sexually assaulted since, in addition to the lack of trust, sex itself is a reminder of the assault.

Use of Alcohol or Drugs

Some people increase their use of alcohol or drugs after a trauma. There is nothing wrong with responsible drinking, but if your use of alcohol or drugs has increased as a result of your traumatic experience, it can slow down your recovery and cause problems of its own.

Interconnections

Many of the reactions to trauma are connected to one another. For example, a flashback may make you feel out of control and will therefore produce fear and arousal. Many people think that their common reactions to the trauma mean that they are “going crazy” or “losing it.” These thoughts can make them even more fearful. Again, as you become aware of the changes you have gone through since the trauma and as you process these experiences during treatment, the symptoms should become less distressing.