

When Terrible Things Happen: For Adults

Immediate Reactions

There are a wide variety of positive and negative reactions that survivors can experience during and immediately after an emergency. These include:

Domain	Negative Responses	Positive Responses
Cognitive	Confusion, disorientation, worry, intrusive thoughts and images, self-blame	Determination and resolve, sharper perception, courage, optimism, faith
Emotional	Shock, sorrow, grief, sadness, fear, anger, numbness, irritability, guilt, and shame	Feeling involved, challenged, mobilized
Social	Extreme withdrawal, interpersonal conflict	Social connectedness, altruistic helping behaviors
Physiological	Fatigue, headache, muscle tension, stomachache, increased heart rate, exaggerated startle response, difficulties sleeping	Alertness, readiness to respond, increased energy

Common Negative Reactions That May Continue

Intrusive reactions

- Distressing thoughts or images of the event while awake or dreaming
- Upsetting emotional or physical reactions to reminders of the experience
- Feeling as if the experience is happening all over again (“flashbacks”)

Avoidance and withdrawal reactions

- Avoiding talking, thinking, or having feelings about the traumatic event
- Avoiding reminders of the event (places and people connected to what happened)
- Restricted emotions, feeling numb
- Feelings of detachment and estrangement from others, social withdrawal
- Loss of interest in usually pleasurable activities

Physical arousal reactions

- Constantly being “on the lookout” for danger, startling easily, or being jumpy
- Irritability or outbursts of anger, feeling “on edge”
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep, problems concentrating or paying attention

Reactions to trauma and loss reminders

- Reactions to places, people, sights, sounds, smells, and feelings that are reminders of the traumatic event
 - Reminders can bring on distressing mental images, thoughts, and emotional/physical reactions
 - Common examples include sudden loud noises, sirens, locations where the event occurred, seeing people with disabilities, funerals, anniversaries of the event, birthday of the deceased, and media reports about the event or its aftermath

Positive changes in priorities, worldview, and expectations

- Enhanced appreciation that family and friends are precious and important
- Meeting the challenge of addressing difficulties (by taking positive action steps, changing the focus of thoughts, using humor, acceptance)
- Shifting expectations about what to expect from day to day and about what is considered a “good day”
- Shifting priorities to focus more on quality time with family or friends
- Increased commitment to self, family, friends, and spiritual/religious faith

Common Reactions When a Loved One Dies

- Confusion, numbness, disbelief, bewilderment, feeling lost
- Feeling angry at the person who died or at people considered responsible for the death
- Strong physical reactions, such as nausea, fatigue, shakiness, and muscle weakness
- Feeling guilty for still being alive
- Intense emotions, such as extreme sadness, anger, or fear
- Increased risk for physical illness and injury
- Decreased productivity or difficulty making decisions
- Having thoughts about the person who died, even when you don’t want to
- Longing for, missing, and wanting to search for the person who died
- Worry that they themselves or another loved one might die
- Anxiety when separated from caregivers or other loved ones
- Heightened sense of the role of spirituality and/or religion



What Doesn't Help

- ✗ Doing risky things (driving recklessly, substance abuse, not taking adequate precautions)
- ✗ Overeating or not eating
- ✗ Not taking care of yourself
- ✗ Extreme withdrawal from family or friends
- ✗ Extreme avoidance of thinking or talking about the event or the death of a loved one
- ✗ Working too much
- ✗ Using alcohol or drugs to cope
- ✗ Excessive watching television or spending time on the internet
- ✗ Withdrawing from pleasant activities
- ✗ Violence or conflict
- ✗ Blaming others

What Helps

- ✓ Seeking a community religious professional
- ✓ Positive reminiscing about a loved one who has died
- ✓ Seeking counseling
- ✓ Taking breaks
- ✓ Keeping a journal
- ✓ Exercising in moderation
- ✓ Trying to maintain a normal schedule
- ✓ Participating in a support group
- ✓ Getting adequate rest and eating healthy meals
- ✓ Using relaxation methods (breathing exercises, meditation, calming self-talk, soothing music)
- ✓ Scheduling and engaging in positive activities (sports, hobbies, reading)
- ✓ Focusing on something practical to do right now to manage the situation
- ✓ Talking to another person to get support or spending time with others

