



## **Common reactions to violence and trauma**

Many people are affected by violence. People who have been direct victims of violence as well as family, friends, and others connected to the victims may react to a violent event.

Whether violence happens to you, or to someone you know, it is normal to feel it personally. People who are direct victims of violence often have physical and emotional reactions that can last for a long time. But other people—family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, emergency service personnel, witnesses to the violence, or those who have something in common with the victims—may also be affected by a particularly violent event.

Although each person reacts differently according to his or her personality, past experiences, and connection to the event, there are some common feelings and emotions that often occur in those who have been involved in or have heard about a violent event.

### **How Do People React to Violence or Trauma?**

It depends on the individual—each person will be affected in his or her own, personal way. Some common reactions to violence and trauma are listed below. Each person may have one or several of these reactions.

#### **Cognitive**

- Memory Loss
- Difficulty Making Decisions
- Difficulty Concentrating
- Confusion
- Losing Track of Time
- Flashbacks
- Replaying the Event

#### **Psychological**

- Feeling Helpless or Powerless
- Grief, Numbness
- Fear or Safety Concerns
- Guilt
- Vulnerability
- Reliving Prior Trauma
- Mood Swings
- Nightmares
- Suicidal Thoughts

#### **Physical**

- Fatigue
- Trouble Sleeping
- Eating Problems
- Nausea, Diarrhea
- Sweating, Rapid Pulse, Chest Pains
- Dizziness, Headaches
- Back or Neck Pain
- Being Easily Startled Catching Colds or Flu

## **Spiritual**

Loss of Faith  
Questioning Faith  
Spiritual Doubts  
Withdrawal from Church  
Lapses in Spiritual Practice  
Despair

## **Relational**

Withdrawing or Clinging to Others  
Alienation from Friends, Family  
Breakdown in Trust  
Changes in Sexual Activity  
Doubts about Relationships  
Coworkers Who "Don't Understand"  
False or Distorted Views of Others  
Alternating Demanding or Distant with Others  
Irritability

## **What Can You Do to Recover from Trauma?**

Different things work for different people. In the aftermath of violence and trauma, the most important thing is to establish some kind of routine, even if it is temporary or it differs from your usual one. Listed below are some specific strategies that can help you deal with trauma and speed your recovery.

### ***Strategy: Diet***

As best you can, try to eat regularly. If you eat sweets and drink soda or coffee, remember that sugar and caffeine can increase your stress level, so try to limit how much of these you use. Sometimes people under extreme stress use more alcohol or drugs than usual. These substances may postpone feelings or reactions, but, in the long run, they actually make them worse. Use common sense about what you put into your body at this particularly stressful time.

### ***Strategy: Rest and Relaxation***

It is important to maintain a regular schedule that lets you get enough sleep and includes relaxing, stress-reducing activities. If you know any formal relaxation techniques, such as meditation or deep breathing exercises, use them. Otherwise, use whatever strategies usually help you relax: listen to music, read, go to church, or play with your pets or children.

### ***Strategy: Physical Activity***

Exercise is one of the best ways of reducing stress. Although it may be difficult to find the time, try to work it into your day. If you usually exercise, try working it back into your schedule. If you do not usually exercise, check with your physician to find out what is best for you. Walking is a great form of exercise that many people can do. You can also play with your children or your pets. It's fun, and it is a way for everyone to manage stress and anxious feelings.

### ***Strategy: Social Contacts***

Keeping in contact with family, friends, coworkers, and others who have shared similar experiences is another good way to reduce stress. You may sometimes want to be by yourself, and this is fine. But, try to keep in contact as much as possible—isolating yourself from those who know and care about you may make matters worse. Children, in particular, may need the attention and close physical contact of their parents and other caretakers.

### ***Strategy: Support Systems***

Talking about your reactions to violence may be difficult, but it does help. It is important that you choose people who listen to how you feel. Supportive listeners may be friends, family, clergy, teachers, or self-help groups. They may also be professional counselors. Keep in mind that people benefit most from counseling when they seek it out themselves.

**Strategy: Support to Others**

In addition to taking care of yourself, offering support to others can help you recover from the emotional impact to trauma. Many people find strength in participating in special events or community activities that honor victims or offer support to loved ones. Religious services, community discussion groups, public ceremonies, and political activities are not for everyone. It is important that you become involved in such activities only when you choose to.

**What Can You Expect in the Course of Recovery?**

Recovery from the emotional impact of violence takes time and involves many different feelings. Sometimes these feelings change quickly or go from one extreme to the other. Be understanding of yourself and others and recognize that everyone does not respond in the same way or at exactly the same times.

People often expect their reactions to disappear quickly, but this is usually not the case. Outside events (media coverage, court dates, holidays, etc.) may lengthen the recovery process. Keep in mind that you might have difficult feelings during these times. You will probably find that others are having similar reactions, and talking to someone you trust may be very helpful.

Remember:

- Violence or trauma affects both direct victims and others who feel connected to the victims or the event.
- Each person will have a unique and personal reaction to violent and traumatic events.
- Self-care is important. Different strategies of self-care will be effective for different people.
- The recovery process takes both time and adequate support.