

Responding and Coping ... After Traumatic Experiences

Common Responses

People respond to traumatic events differently. We cannot control how we respond; we can only accept how we are emotionally and physically responding. It is important to work at not giving in to our avoidance tendencies and take small steps to face what we experienced and how we are feeling.

Sometimes people who have survived a traumatic event act as if they are in danger when they get stressed or are reminded of the trauma. Concerns about being safe are heightened and at times people dealing with their fear may become overly aggressive, lashing out to protect themselves when there is no need.

Although thinking about the trauma and re-experiencing our reactions to the trauma is unpleasant, it is a sign that the body and mind are actively working to understand and cope with what has happened.

Physical Reactions	Emotional/Cognitive Reactions	Avoidance Reactions
Insomnia- sleeping less than 6 hours and having nightmares	Shock, terror, fear, irritable, anger, guilt, sadness	Avoiding conversations and anything that may remind you of the event... places, people, activities
Fatigue: your body feels heavy, slow, exhausted	Helpless, vulnerable, anxious	Trouble remembering important parts of what happened during the trauma
Decreased appetite, gastrointestinal upset	Memory impairment, disbelief, confusion, nightmares	Shutting down emotionally
Increased physical pain, headaches	Self-blame, distrust, blaming others; Increased relational conflict	Trouble having loving feelings or any strong emotions
Heart palpitations or pains in the chest, feeling shaky and sweaty	Impaired concentration and intrusive thoughts/memories; Impaired decision making ability	Avoiding situations that might make you have a strong emotional reaction
Dizzy spells, difficulty breathing	Tunnel vision, dreamlike, spacey feeling	Losing interest in things you usually enjoy
Reduced immune response, vulnerable to illness	Feeling numb physically and emotionally	Feeling disconnected from the world around you and things that happen to you
Hyper-arousal and startle response	Impaired work/school performance; Not productive	Feeling strange, not yourself

(adapted from Disaster Mental Health Response Handbook, p. 28)

The physical and emotional reactions/symptoms of the trauma lessen with time in duration, frequency, and intensity. Recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal and will decrease over time, becoming less painful. If your reactions interfere with your ability to continue your normal activities, and particularly if they interfere with sleeping, you may want to seek help. Contact the NIU Employee Assistance Program at 753-9191.

Tips for Coping:

- **Physical exercise along with progressive relaxation will improve sleep and concentration.**
- **Keep a journal: write through your sleeplessness and change the ending of your nightmares.**
- **Talk to people; talking is one of the most healing activities. It is how we let go of stress.**
- **Give yourself permission to feel rotten and have a grieving day. Remember on these days to share your feelings with others.**
- **Give yourself permission to escape graphic images of the trauma and have moments of happiness.**
- **Resist the temptation to isolate yourself. Spend some time with others.**
- **Get plenty of rest and eat regular meals even if you don't feel like it.**