

Understanding Reactions to Traumatic Events

We all react to each event in our lives. Like all living things we respond to the environment and events that we experience. Our reactions to events are complex processes that encompass our thinking, feeling/emotional, and physiological states.

We can expect that people who have been sexually assaulted will have a response to living through a traumatic event. The following responses are viewed as healthy reactions to an abnormal (traumatic) situation. Of course, how trauma affects a person varies greatly, but there are some typical responses seen in individuals who have been traumatized.

Physiological

- Nausea
- Upset stomach
- Tremors (lips, hands)
- Feeling uncoordinated
- Profuse sweating
- Chills
- Diarrhea
- Dizziness
- Chest pain (should be checked at hospital)
- Rapid heartbeat
- Rapid breathing
- Easily startled
- Increased blood pressure
- Headaches
- Muscle aches
- Sleep disturbances
- Loss or increase of appetite

Cognitive

- Slowed thinking
- Difficulty making decisions
- Difficulty problem solving
- Confusion
- Disorientation (especially to place and time)
- Difficulty calculating
- Difficulty concentrating
- Memory problems
- Difficulty naming common objects
- Seeing the event over and over in your mind

- Distressing dreams
- Poor attention span
- Attempts at denial
- Self-blame and doubts
- Thoughts of death

Emotional

- Anxiety
- Fear
- Guilt
- Grief
- Disbelief
- Depression
- Sadness
- Feeling lost
- Feeling abandoned
- Feeling isolated
- Irritability
- Anger
- Worrying about others
- Wanting to hide
- Wanting to limit contact with others
- Feeling numb
- Shock
- Avoidance of all triggers

If you are experiencing these responses it does not mean that you are going “crazy,” but it may mean that speaking to others may help. Some of these reactions will cease over time. However, if these reactions become overwhelming, are significantly impacting your life, or have continued for a long period of time after the assault, seeking counseling services may be warranted.