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The Trauma Response

After a trauma, people may experience a wide range of responses. Such reactions are experienced not only by people who were involved in the trauma first-hand, but often also by those who have either witnessed, heard about, or have a relationship with someone immediately affected. Long after the trauma, reactions tend to be triggered by people, places, things, sights, sounds, smells, or tastes associated with the trauma. Reactions may reappear at time that seem totally unrelated to the event. Here is a list of common physical and emotional reactions to trauma, as well as a list of helpful coping strategies.

PHYSICAL REACTIONS

Sudden sweating and/or heart palpitations (fluttering)	Easily startled by noises or touch
Aches and pains	Susceptible to colds and illnesses
Changes in sleep patterns, appetite	Constipation or diarrhea
Increased use of alcohol or drugs	

EMOTIONAL REACTIONS

Shock, disbelief, denial	Self-blame and/or survivor guilt
Fear, anxiety, disorientation	Shame
Grief	Diminished interest in everyday activities
Hyper-alertness or hypervigilance	Depression
Irritability, restlessness, outbursts of anger or rage	Unpleasant past memories resurfacing
Emotional swings – crying and then laughing	Loss of a sense of order or fairness
Worrying	Expectation of doom and fear of the future
Nightmares	Tendency to isolate oneself
Feeling helpless, panicky, out of control	Increased need to control experiences
Minimizing the experience	Feelings of detachment
Attempts to avoid anything associated with trauma	Difficulty concentrating or remembering
Concern over burdening others with problems	Intrusive thoughts of the trauma
Emotional numbing or restricted range of feelings	Difficulty trusting and/or feelings of betrayal
Flashbacks -- feeling like the trauma is happening now	Questioning spiritual beliefs

Coping Strategies

- Mobilize support system – reach out and connect with others, especially those who may have shared the stressful event
- Talk about the traumatic experience
- Cry
- Engage in exercise like jogging, aerobics, bicycling, walking
- Use or learn relaxation exercises like yoga, stretching, massage

Coping Strategies Continued

- Humor; remember that it is okay to laugh
- Pray and/or meditate
- Take hot baths
- Listen to music
- Maintain balanced diet and normal sleep cycle to the extent possible
- Avoid overusing stimulants like caffeine, sugar, or nicotine and excessive use of alcohol and drugs
- Make a commitment to something personally meaningful and important every day
- Hug those you love: hugging releases endogenous opioids, the body's natural pain-killer
- Eat healthy comfort foods
- Promote pro-active responses toward personal/community safety
- Write about your experience in detail, just for yourself or to share with others

The Recovery Process

Give yourself time.

People are usually surprised that reactions to trauma last longer than they expect. It may take weeks, months, or years, to find a new balance or stability in your life, to find a way to reconstruct the fragments of your experience. Friends, family, and society in general may push you to “get over it” before you’re ready. You may find yourself irritated at words like “healing,” “closure,” or “normal.” Others may also prematurely encourage forgiveness of, compassion for, or understanding of the behavior of the perpetrator. Remind them that such responses are not helpful for your recovery right now. Each person recovers on his or her own time schedule. Respect your own reconstruction process.

Reach out to others.

Find others who can listen patiently. Some people may get through this period with the help and support of family and friends. Many people find that support groups, individual, or family counseling is helpful. Either way, the key is attachment – ask for help, support, understanding, and opportunities to talk.

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