

Reactions to Crisis and Trauma

A crisis is any serious interruption in the steady state of equilibrium of a person, family or group. An emotionally significant event that acts as a turning point for better or worse.

Mitchell, Ph.D. and Resnick, M.D. 1981

Trauma calls into question basic human relationships. It breaches attachments of family, friendship, love and community. It shatters the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. It undermines the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. It violates the victim's faith in a natural or divine order and casts the victim into a state of existential crisis.

Judith Herman, M.D., Trauma and Recovery, 1992

Victims may experience some strong reactions immediately following a crisis event. It is very common, in fact, quite *normal*, for people to experience emotional aftershocks or stress reactions when they have passed through a traumatic event. Sometimes the stress reactions appear immediately after the traumatic event. Sometimes they may appear a few hours or a few days later. And in some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reactions appear. Anniversary dates and triggering events may cause stress reactions to reoccur. The signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks or a few months and occasionally longer depending on the severity of the traumatic event. With understanding and the support of loved ones, the stress reactions usually pass more quickly. Occasionally the traumatic event is so painful that professional assistance from a traumatic specialist or counselor may be necessary. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that the particular event was too powerful for the person to manage by himself or herself. The following are some very common signs and signals of traumatic stress reactions. (Mitchell, Everly)

Physical	Cognitive	Emotional	Relational	Behavioral	Spiritual
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ "Flight, Fight, Freeze ✓ Serotonin and Cortisol changes ✓ Shock, numbness ✓ Nausea ✓ Exhaustion ✓ Muscle tremors, aches ✓ Twitches ✓ Chest pain ✓ Rapid heart rate ✓ Headaches ✓ Weakness, fatigue ✓ Dizziness ✓ Profuse sweating ✓ Elevated BP ✓ Hair Loss ✓ Apathy ✓ Chills ✓ Insomnia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Blaming someone ✓ Confusion ✓ Poor Attention ✓ Poor decisions ✓ Poor concentration ✓ Memory Problems ✓ Hyper vigilance ✓ Nightmares ✓ Intrusive images ✓ Poor problem solving ✓ Difficulty calculating ✓ Difficulty identifying objects or people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Anxiety ✓ Guilt ✓ Numbing ✓ Grief and Traumatic grief ✓ Denial ✓ Panic feelings, startle response ✓ Emotional shock ✓ Uncertainty ✓ Depression ✓ Apprehension ✓ Intense anger ✓ Irritability ✓ Agitation ✓ Loss of emotional control; outbursts ✓ Euphoria ✓ Obsessiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Withdrawal from family, co-workers, colleagues ✓ Withdrawal from organizations and affiliations ✓ Withdrawal from social and faith based affiliations ✓ Isolation ✓ Stigma, racism, sexism, media response ✓ Secondary injuries from friends, family, social and professional institutions contribute to additional stress ✓ Unemployment or underemployment ✓ Discontinuation of educational goals or lack of motivation to attempt ✓ Community involvement or lack of political involvement ✓ Institutional involvement with: Social Security, VA, criminal justice, federal agencies, FEMA, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Change in speech ✓ Withdrawal ✓ Emotional outbursts ✓ Accident proneness ✓ Potential for violence ✓ Suspiciousness ✓ Loss or increase of appetite ✓ Startle response ✓ Alcohol consumption ✓ Inability to rest ✓ Pacing ✓ Change in sexual functioning ✓ Periods of crying ✓ Proneness to accidents ✓ Recklessness ✓ Non-Specific bodily complaints ✓ Hyper-alert to environment ✓ Ritualistic behavior ✓ Homelessness (extreme reactions) ✓ Criminal Behavior; Incarceration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Questions about faith ✓ Self-blame ✓ Guilt, survivor guilt ✓ Anger at God ✓ Anger ✓ Realization of vulnerability and morality ✓ Withdrawal from faith and religion ✓ Concern about hereafter ✓ Questions about good and evil ✓ Questioning God ✓ Comfort in knowing deceased is with God ✓ Redefining moral values and intangible priorities ✓ Promising, bargaining and challenging God during times or duress and trauma ✓ Coping with fear ✓ Searching for meaning and hope ✓ Concern about vengeance, justice and forgiveness ✓ Spiritual "awakening" or strengthening of faith and religion ✓ Relying on faith and prayer