

10. Traumatic events: common reactions

A traumatic event is one that causes someone to experience unusually strong reactions, especially if the person involved feared for their life or felt they had no control over what was happening e.g.

- A violent or sexual attack
- The sudden or traumatic death of someone close
- A road traffic accident – even a ‘minor’ one
- Witnessing a horrific death or incident, even if you did not know the people involved
- A frightening or unexpected event
- Prolonged exposure to intense or repeated stress. This can include bullying and harassment, domestic violence and sexual abuse

The aftershocks can occur immediately after the incident or hours, days, weeks or even months later. The symptoms can affect thinking, feeling and behaviour and feel very unnerving.

SOME COMMON REACTIONS

- **Shock:** numbness, disbelief, the experience appearing unreal with a dreamlike quality.
- **Fear:** of danger to yourself and those you love, of being left alone or having to leave loved ones, of ‘breaking down’ or ‘losing control’.
- **Helplessness:** powerlessness and vulnerability.
- **Feeling ‘jumpy’** or nervous in everyday situations.

- **Flashbacks:** sudden replay/images of the traumatic event, as if it was happening *now*.
- **Anger:** at what has happened, at whoever caused it or allowed it to happen, at the injustice and senselessness of it all, at the lack of understanding by others; at yourself.
- **Sadness or Despair:** for death, injuries and losses of every kind, for the loss of belief that the world is a safe and predictable place
- **Shame and Guilt:** for having acted/reacted or not acted/reacted in certain ways and feeling you could have done things differently; for feeling helpless, emotional, needing others; for surviving.
- **Physical Reactions:** May appear straight away or come some time later. e.g.
 - Tiredness, dizziness, muscular tension.
 - Loss of memory or concentration.
 - Palpitations or shakes, difficulty in breathing and/or tightness in the throat or chest.
 - Nausea or diarrhoea; menstrual disorders.
 - Disturbed sleep, sometimes due to intrusive memories or dreams, which may or may not correspond to the actual event.
 - Lack of sexual interest.

It is important to remember that these responses are common and normal after a traumatic event, and often fade with time. If they persist, counselling can help you to process the event and find ways to help you manage the symptoms. You might also consider going to your GP.

See the Counselling and Wellbeing website for helpful online resources on Trauma: students.leeds.ac.uk/counsellingandwellbeing