Reactions to Traumatic Events

Both during and after a traumatic event, you may experience a variety of physical, cognitive and emotional reactions, which may include some of the following:

Physical and Behavioral Reactions
- Change in appetite
- Cold-like symptoms
- Dizziness
- Fatigue and exhaustion
- Gastrointestinal disturbance
- Headaches
- Isolation or withdrawal
- Muscle aches
- Muscle tremors and twitches
- Sleep disturbance and nightmares
- Startle reactions
- Under- or over-activity
- Vomiting

Cognitive Reactions
- Amnesia for the event
- Confusion
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty making decisions and solving problems
- Flashbacks to the event
- Lowered attention span
- Memory disturbance and forgetfulness
- Minimizing the incident
- Preoccupation with the event
- Questioning core beliefs
- Problems naming familiar things
- Slowed thinking

Emotional Reactions
- Anger and irritability
- Anxiety and tension
- Denial and disbelief
- Fear
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and oversensitivity
- Grief and sadness
- Guilt and self-doubt
- Hypervigilance
- Mood swings
- Moodiness and depression

These are normal reactions to an abnormal event. Many individuals experience some combination of these after a serious crisis or trauma. Although painful, these symptoms are part of the process of recovery.

Although it is not possible to make these reactions quickly go away, there are many things you can do to aid your recovery process:

- Don’t label yourself “crazy.” Remind yourself that you’re having normal reactions to an abnormal event.
- Be tolerant of others who may not react the same way as you. There is no “right” way to react after a traumatic event. Different people react in different ways.
- Within the first 24 to 48 hours, periods of strenuous physical exercise alternated with relaxation will generally alleviate some of the physical reactions.
- Try to maintain a sense of structure in your daily activities. Keep your life and your daily routines as normal as possible.
- Reach out to others. Spend time with family, friends and others you trust. Talk and listen to each other. Talk can be the most healing “medicine.”
- Help others who have been affected by the trauma by sharing feelings and checking out how they are doing. Reach out to those who seem isolated or alone. Maintain a balance between helping others and caring for yourself. Avoid extremes in either direction.
- Give yourself permission to have whatever feelings you have. Share your feelings and reactions with others. Allow others to share their feelings and reactions with you.
- Avoid trying to numb your feelings through use of drugs or alcohol. (However, do not make any changes in prescription medication without first consulting your physician).
- If you find it helpful to write, keep a journal. Put your feelings, thoughts and reactions down in writing. If you’re having trouble falling asleep, write.
- Consider making use of available support resources, such as talking with a member of the clergy or a mental health professional. The Office of the Chaplaincy can be reached at 289-8500 and CAPS at 289-8119.
- If your symptoms persist beyond a few weeks, or get worse, and are disrupting your daily functioning, seek out professional mental health services. Resources for UR students are available through CAPS and mental health services for UR employees are available through the Employee Assistance Program, at 1 (800) 346-5484.

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