

Emotional Responses to Trauma

What to Expect

The initial shock following a crime, sudden death, accident or other trauma is a painful reality for everyone involved. Many times right after a horrible or shocking event a person is in shock and may feel “frozen” or numb and may not be able to remember simple things like phone numbers or where the car is. Often a person may not even believe what has happened. It is also common to have no particular feelings at all about the event for a while.

Eventually, even though the event is over, it is normal for a person to experience strong emotional or physical reactions. Sometimes the reactions appear immediately after the event or they may appear a few hours or a few days later. In some cases, weeks or months may pass before stress reactions are felt.

People are often surprised that reactions to trauma are more intense and can last longer than expected. It may take weeks, months and, in some cases, years to feel healed. Many people will get through this period on their own with the help and support of friends and family. Often, however, well-meaning family and friends might push a loved one to “get over it”. Sometimes the traumatic event is so disturbing or painful that professional assistance from a counselor may be helpful. This does not imply craziness or weakness. It means that the event is just too powerful for the person to manage alone.

Common Reactions to Trauma

- Shock and disbelief
- Having unwanted memories
- Anxiety or panicky feelings
- Feeling “lost” or “out of it”
- Being near tears much of the time
- Increased irritability
- Sleep disturbances
- Loss of appetite
- Depression
- Headache, nausea, or physical pain
- Disruption of family life
- Withdrawal
- Loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed
- Flashbacks, recurring nightmares
- Guilt
- Confusion and difficulty concentrating

Children’s Reactions to Trauma

Children might react to trauma with feelings of confusion, anger, guilt and fear. Frequently they will regress in behavior, i.e., wanting to become a baby again and wetting the bed. They also may become irritable, clingy and cranky. Children might have trouble sleeping and may seem to need more attention and comfort than usual. They may feel unsafe and may not understand what has happened, which could cause them to feel frightened and frustrated. It is not uncommon for children to have nightmares, which could begin as

nightmares of the event, but could become more generalized like dreams of monsters. Children will commonly feel afraid after a traumatic loss of familiar people and surroundings.

It is helpful for children to talk about their experiences, draw pictures or play out events. They may need to do this over and over because children will understand only small parts of the traumatic event each time. Giving children hugs and attention encourages them to talk and express their feelings. This will help them to get through the experience in a healthy way.

Suggestions for Coping

- Structure your life as much as possible. Make small daily decisions to feel more in control.
- Avoid making major life decisions during this difficult time. This probably is not a good time to move, change jobs, or add more pressure.
- Allow yourself to experience uncomfortable recurring feelings.
- Talk about your feelings.
- Make the time to meet with a friend or family member who can and will support you.
- Do nice things for yourself. This won't "fix" anything but it might lift your spirits for a little while.
- Eat regularly and nutritionally. You may not have an appetite but your body still needs nutrition.
- Limit your use of alcohol and/or drugs. If you need help to sleep, talk with your doctor.
- Increase your physical exercise.
- Give yourself permission to feel down.
- Know that there is no "right" way to feel. Whatever your feelings are, they are normal, appropriate reactions to an abnormal situation.

How Family and Friends Can Help

- Listen carefully and spend time with the person.
- Reassure him or her that it's safe now and his or her feelings are normal. Say you are sorry this happened.
- Avoid offering easy answers or giving advice.
- Help with specific tasks or errands. This can be helpful since people feel unfocused and unable to make decisions.
- Avoid blaming the person or saying "you are lucky it wasn't worse". It is important to support them through this difficult time.
- Avoid talking about your own experiences. The person needs to self-focus at this time.
- Stay involved in the person's recovery. Ask how you can best be supportive and help find available services.
- Remember that each person experiences trauma differently. Be understanding of the different ways in which each person copes and the different pace at which each person heals.

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Boulder County Sheriff's Office

Victim Assistance	303-441-3656
Administration	303-441-3600
Non-Emergency Dispatch	303-441-4444

Erie Police Department 303-926-2800

Lafayette Police Department 303-665-5571

Louisville Police Department 303-666-8634

Nederland Police Department 303-258-3250

Coroner's Office 303-441-3535

District Attorney's Office

Victim Witness	303-441-3700
Victim Compensation	303-682-6801

Boulder County Mental Health Partners 303-443-8500

Colorado Crisis Services (Emergency Mental Health) 844-893-8255 or text TALK to 38255

Colorado Legal Services 303-449-7575

Grief Support

TRU Community Care	303-604-5300
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Domestic Violence Safe Houses and Services

Boulder	303-444-2424
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Longmont	303-772-4422
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Sexual Assault Hotline and Support (MESA) 303-443-7300

Boulder County Housing and Human Services 303-441-1000

Emergency Family Assistance 303-442-3042

OUR Center 303-772-5529