

## Reactions to Trauma: Signs, Symptoms, and Suggestions for Help

Traumas come in many forms: accidents, terrorism, war, rape and more. They can be overwhelming emotional events. Even though you already may have had strong feelings, be aware that you also may have strong emotional or physical reactions at a later time. It is very common, and quite normal, for people to experience emotional aftershocks when they have passed through such a distressing event. Sometimes emotional aftershocks or stress reactions appear immediately after the event. Sometimes they appear a few hours or a few days later. And, in some cases, weeks or months may pass before the stress reaction appears.

Signs and symptoms of a stress reaction may last a few days, a few weeks, or even a few months or occasionally longer. With understanding and the support of loved ones, stress reactions will usually pass more quickly. Occasionally, the event is so painful that professional assistance from a mental health professional may be necessary. A need for professional help does not imply craziness or weakness. It simply indicates that this particular event was too powerful for the person to manage by himself or herself at this time. Here are some common signs and symptoms of stress reactions in a traumatized person. The advice is broken down by age categories in order to help apply the assistance that is most helpful to each age group.

### Reactions to Trauma and Suggestions by Age Range

#### Ages 1-5

##### Emotional Symptoms

- Anxiety
- Generalized fear
- Irritability
- Angry outbursts
- Sadness
- Withdrawal

##### Behavioral Symptoms

- Clinging to parents or familiar adults
- Helplessness and passive behavior
- Resumption of bedwetting or thumb sucking
- Fears of the dark
- Avoidance of sleeping alone
- Increased crying

##### Physical Symptoms

- Loss of appetite
- Stomach aches
- Nausea
- Sleep problems
- Nightmares
- Speech difficulties
- Tics

#### How to Help

##### AT HOME

- Give verbal reassurance and physical comfort
- Clarify misconceptions repeatedly
- Provide comforting bedtime routines
- Help with labels for emotions
- Avoid unnecessary separations
- Permit child to sleep in parents' room temporarily
- Demystify reminders
- Encourage expression regarding losses (deaths, pets, toys)
- Monitor media exposure
- Encourage expression through play activities

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## AT SCHOOL

- Draw expressive pictures, tell stories of disaster and recovery
- Use coloring books on disaster, loss, coping with feelings
- Read books on related themes
- Use dolls, puppets, toys, blocks for reenactment play
- Facilitate group activities that foster empowerment and understanding
- Talk about safety and self-protection
- Provide parent education, support meetings and an educational brochure
- Provide absenteeism outreach to families and children
- Identify stressed children for assessment and referral
- Provide in-service training on children and disaster, trauma, and grief
- Provide school-based crisis hotline
- Encourage students to resume normal roles and routine activities

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## Ages 6-11

### Emotional Symptoms

- Fear of feelings
- Withdrawal from friends, familiar activities
- Reminders triggering fears
- Angry outbursts
- Preoccupation with crime, criminals, safety, and death
- Self blame
- Guilt

### Behavioral Symptoms

- Decline in school performance
- School avoidance
- Aggressive behavior at home or school
- Hyperactive or silly behavior
- Whining, clinging, acting like a younger child
- Increased competition with younger siblings for parents' attention
- Traumatic play and reenactments

### Physical Symptoms

- Change in appetite
- Headaches
- Stomach aches
- Sleep disturbances, nightmares
- Somatic complaints

## How to Help

### AT HOME

- Give additional attention and consideration
- Set gentle but firm limits for acting-out behavior
- Listen to child's repeated telling of disaster experience
- Encourage verbal and play expression of thoughts and feelings
- Provide structured but undemanding home chores and rehabilitation activities
- Rehearse safety measures for future disasters

### AT SCHOOL

- Encourage free drawing, free writing, complete-a-sentence exercise after discussion of disaster
- Tell stories of disaster, loss, and recovery
- Read books on related themes that may generate discussion or healing
- Create a play about related themes and survivorship
- Facilitate school study or projects to increase understanding, promote discussion
- Talk about safety, family protection, school and family preparedness
- Teach calming techniques (deep breathing, visualization)

- Conduct small group or individual interventions for at-risk children
- Conduct group "debriefing" discussion to express and normalize reactions, correct misinformation, and enhance coping and peer support

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## Ages 12-18

### Emotional Symptoms

- Loss of interest in peer social activities, hobbies, recreation
- Sadness or depression
- Anxiety and fearfulness about safety
- Resistance to authority
- Feelings of inadequacy and helplessness
- Guilt, self-blame, shame and self-consciousness
- Desire for revenge

### Behavioral Symptoms

- Decline in academic performance
- Rebellion at home or school
- Decline in previous responsible behavior
- Agitation or decrease in energy level, apathy
- Delinquent behavior
- Risk-taking behavior
- Social withdrawal
- Abrupt shift in relationships

### Physical Symptoms

- Appetite changes
- Headaches
- Gastrointestinal problems
- Skin eruptions
- Complaints of vague aches and pains

## How to Help

### AT HOME

- Give additional attention and consideration
- Encourage discussion of disaster experiences with peers, significant adults
- Avoid insistence on discussion of feelings with parents
- Encourage physical activities
- Encourage resumption of regular social and recreational activities

### AT SCHOOL

- Encourage free drawing, free writing, complete-a-sentence exercise after discussion of disaster
- Conduct school programs for assisting community with recovery, helping others
- Conduct projects for commemoration and memorialization
- Encourage discussion of losses and feelings with peers and adults
- Address rebellious, risk-taking, aggressive, or isolating behaviors
- Resume sports, club, and social activities when appropriate

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## Adults

### Emotional Symptoms

- Shock, disorientation, and numbness
- Depression, sadness
- Grief
- Irritability, anger
- Anxiety, fear
- Despair, hopelessness
- Guilt, self-doubt
- Mood swings

### Behavioral Symptoms

- Sleep problems
- Avoidance of reminders
- Excessive activity level
- Protectiveness toward loved ones
- Crying easily
- Angry outbursts
- Increased conflicts with family
- Hyper-vigilance
- Isolation, withdrawal, shutting down

### Physical Symptoms

- Nausea
- Headaches
- Fatigue, exhaustion
- Gastrointestinal distress
- Appetite change
- Somatic complaints
- Worsening of chronic conditions

### How to Help

- Ensure access to emergency medical services
- Provide supportive listening and opportunity to talk about experience and losses
- Assist with prioritizing and problem-solving
- Assist family to facilitate communication and effective functioning
- Provide information on traumatic stress and coping, children's reactions, and tips for families
- Provide crime victim services
- Provide information on referral resources

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## Older Adults

### Emotional Symptoms

- Depression
- Despair about losses
- Apathy
- Confusion, disorientation
- Suspicion
- Agitation, anger
- Fears of institutionalization
- Anxiety with unfamiliar surroundings
- Embarrassment about receiving "hand outs"

### Behavioral Symptoms

- Withdrawal and isolation
- Reluctance to leave home
- Mobility limitations
- Relocation adjustment problems

### Physical Symptoms

- Worsening of chronic illnesses
- Sleep disorders
- Memory problems
- Somatic symptoms
- More susceptible to hypo and hyperthermia
- Physical and sensory limitations (sight, hearing) interfere with recovery

### How to Help

- Provide strong and persistent verbal reassurance
- Provide orienting information
- Ensure physical needs are addressed (water, food, warmth)
- Assist with reconnecting with family and support systems
- Assist in obtaining medical and financial assistance
- Encourage discussion of traumatic experience, losses, and expression of emotions
- Provide crime victim assistance

*Adapted from United States Department of Health and Human Services*

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