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Common Immediate Reactions to Trauma

Stress reactions immediately following a disaster occur in most people. They are normal and occur because survivors and others indirectly exposed to the trauma (e.g., via television) accurately perceive the danger of a disaster. Most people naturally recover from even strong stress reactions with symptoms gradually decreasing over time. Many stress reactions resolve within ten days, but some mild symptoms may continue for up to six months.

Extremely common stress reactions

- Shock, numbness, dissociation (losing time, mind going blank, time goes fast or slow).
- Irritability, arguments with spouse, children, friends.
- Anger at perpetrators, blaming those in charge.
- Poor sleep, poor concentration.
- Hypervigilance, suspicion.
- Hyperarousal, jumpiness.

Beliefs are disturbed

- Decreased sense of safety (“The world is not a safe place.”).
- Decreases sense of invulnerability (“I can’t protect myself and loved ones.”).
- Decreased sense of control (“I can’t influence events that affect me.”).

Emotional reactions

- Fear of harm to self and loved ones.
- Grief and depression.
- Feeling hopeless.
- Feeling nothing.
- Uncertain of feelings.
- Feeling lost.
- Feeling abandoned.
- Wishing to hide.
- Wishing to die.

Physical symptoms

- Nausea.
- Upset stomach.
- Tremors.
- Lightheaded, dizzy.

- Rapid heart rate.

Behavioral symptoms

- Increased smoking.
- Increased/decreased eating.
- Excessive humor.
- Excessive silence.
- Withdrawal.