

When Tragedy Strikes: Our More Subtle Reactions

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People involved in a tragedy, react very differently. Reactions vary from none to mild to intense. For example, some of you may find your emotions to be numb or 'shut down.' On the other hand, others may have a highly intense emotional response. Most people, however, will have reactions somewhere in between. Your personal reaction will depend on your closeness to the event and the people most affected by it. In any case, even though there is clear personal distress, it is a fact that at least 9 of 10 people exposed to a major tragedy will recover over time.

Many of you may be familiar with the more obvious reactions to a tragic event: difficulty sleeping, nightmares, loss of appetite, eating disruption (too little or too much), chest pain, withdrawal and isolation, uncontrollable crying or other emotional outbursts, including intense anger. Some people noticeably increase their use of alcohol; some try to find emotional relief by taking another person's prescribed medication.

The purpose of this handout is help survivors, along with their family members, friends, employers and coworkers become aware of the milder or more subtle reactions that may occur.

You may find that you have difficulty paying attention to what you are doing. Setting priorities or even making routine decisions may be a little more difficult. You might more impatient and more irritable than usual. You might find yourself arguing with others over little things. You might snap at others for no apparent reason. Confusion, clutter or noise may irritate you. You might have a mild, but persistent headache. Others who have been through a major tragedy report a constant tiredness. Some people will need talk about their experience frequently. This is not uncommon. Talking helps us make personal sense of the experience. Tears may seemingly come from nowhere. You may find that you are much more alert (hyper-vigilant) than usual. Fearfulness may increase. It is possible that some people will become a bit more accident prone than usual. And, you might find it harder than usual to get up and go to work.

These reactions—which are normal responses to an abnormal event— will generally improve over time. Within three to four weeks you should notice an improvement in how you feel. This doesn't mean you will be fully back to your usual self. It means that you should be seeing a light at the end of the tunnel.

In the meantime, you can do some things that will help you get through this. Get a reasonable amount of rest, get exercise, and eat healthy food. If food is unappealing, try eating smaller meals but more often. Stay socially involved with family and friends. Try to maintain your usual or typical schedule. Give yourself permission to feel rotten and share those feelings with others. Some survivors have found conversations with their spiritual advisors to be very helpful. Most likely you will never really understand why the tragedy occurred. It is difficult but important to begin to accept the idea that what you and others have gone through often will make absolutely no logical sense. You can, however, try to make a personal meaning of this tragic event for your own life.

While you may feel deep grief and emotional distress for awhile, but as long as you have a sense of improvement after a few weeks, you are on the path to recovery. If you do not feel better within a month, professional help should be sought.