

Trauma in the Community

People who have experienced the school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton Connecticut, directly or indirectly may demonstrate changes in behavior. Traumatic events happen everyday. Although trauma affects people in different ways, there are some common reactions that you may experience. These post-trauma signs and symptoms may begin immediately, or might happen after a few days or weeks. It is important to remember that these reactions are normal. Although it might feel abnormal, it is quite common for people to experience emotional “aftershocks” following a traumatic event.

Common Reactions to Trauma

Feel fear or anxiety about subjects that you never thought about before the event occurred.

After a disturbing event, people may question things such as their faith, their parenting skills, or their ability to perform well at work where before people usually took these things for granted.

Have emotional outbursts and startled responses. You may have a tendency to overreact to sudden, unexpected loud noises, such as a car backfiring. In a heightened state of awareness, this reaction is understandable. When you find yourself in this type of situation, taking slow, deep breaths can help to calm you.

Be extremely aware of things around you. In times like these, people are more aware of things that they might otherwise overlook, such as a noise in their house or a helicopter in the sky. Shortly after disturbing events, everyday occurrences may not seem everyday anymore. This often accompanies a feeling of being vulnerable or unsafe. When having these types of feelings, it is important to keep a healthy perspective between what you feel and what you know.

Experience a change in sleep or eating patterns. Disturbances in sleep are quite common. You may find yourself sleeping a little more or a little less than usual, or you may have bad dreams or nightmares. You may also experience loss of appetite, a craving for “comfort” foods, or digestive problems like nausea, diarrhea, or constipation. Try to stick to your regular routine. It could help get other daily habits back on track as well.

Become easily distracted. A negative form of distraction is resorting to numbing behaviors such as drinking or drug use. You may be trying to remove yourself from the situation so that you don’t have to think about it. There are, however, ways to distract yourself in a positive fashion. Try listening to music, reading a book or going out to dinner with friends to get your mind off things for a while.

Have flashbacks, disturbing images or memories. A common reaction after being exposed to a traumatic event is having flashbacks or images pop into your head without any apparent reason.

Again, this is a normal reaction. If you find that the frequency or intensity of the flashbacks does not gradually lessen, seek professional help to learn how to manage these thoughts.

Experience mood shifts and intense emotions. Feelings are neither right nor wrong, but they can be very confusing. You may find yourself feeling anxious or fearful one moment and tearful or angry the next. It is important to try to identify what you are feeling so that you can be aware of how it may be influencing your thoughts and actions. Writing down your feelings in a journal can be a good way to look for any patterns and to track whether your feelings are becoming more manageable or not.

What Causes These Reactions?

They are a sign that the body and mind are actively trying to cope with the traumatic experience. They may not seem like logical, expected reactions. These symptoms are automatic responses that many people experience.

How Long Do These Symptoms Last?

The signs and symptoms of trauma should lessen with time. There are some factors that may influence how mild or severe your reactions are, such as your degree of exposure to the trauma, other personal or psychological problems, and whether you have been exposed to other, similar traumas in the past.

If you are concerned about your reactions, note the specific symptoms that worry you. It may help to write them down. For each symptom, note the:

- **Duration** – Normally, trauma reactions will grow less intense and disappear within a few weeks.
- **Intensity** – If the reaction interferes with your ability to carry on your life normally.

Can't I Just Try to Forget About What Happened?

People who have been through traumas often want to avoid reminders of the trauma, because they can be very upsetting. Sometimes they are aware of this and avoid reminders on purpose; sometimes they do it without realizing it. Ways of avoiding thoughts, feelings, and sensations associated with the trauma can include:

- Avoiding conversations and staying away from places, activities, or people that might remind you of the traumatic event
- Having trouble remembering important parts of what happened during the trauma
- “Shutting down” emotionally or feeling emotionally numb
- Being unable to feel any strong emotion
- Feeling strange or “not yourself”
- Feeling disconnected from the world around you
- Avoiding situations that might make you have a strong emotional reaction
- Experiencing “weird” or unusual physical sensations
- Feeling physically numb, not feeling pain or other sensations
- Losing interest in things you used to enjoy

Avoiding thoughts about the trauma or avoiding treatment for your trauma-related problems is a temporary, but risky, solution. By facing your fears and getting help when needed, you will find your symptoms ease and you can get back to “normal” more quickly.

What Else Do I Need to Know About Post-Traumatic Symptoms?

Secondary symptoms are additional problems that arise as a result of post-traumatic symptoms. For example, a person who avoids talking about a traumatic event may end up pulling away from friends; as a result, she may begin to feel lonely and depressed. As time passes after a traumatic experience, more and more secondary symptoms may develop. These symptoms can become more troubling and disabling than the original symptoms.

Associated symptoms are problems that don't come directly from being overwhelmed with fear, but happen because of other things that were going on at the time of the trauma. For example, a person who gets psychologically traumatized in a car accident might also get physically injured and then get depressed because he can't work or leave the house.

Examples of Secondary and/or Associated Trauma Symptoms

Aggressive behavior toward oneself or others can happen due to anger or frustration over the inability to control other trauma-response symptoms, or because of the nature of the trauma itself. Angry feelings and aggressive behavior pushes other people away. Anger and aggression can cause job problems, marital and relationship problems, and loss of friendships. If you find that you have a quick temper, feel angry much of the time, or have thoughts of hurting yourself or someone else, find someone you trust to talk about your feelings and to get support in dealing with your anger in healthy ways.

Self-blame, guilt, and shame can happen when post-trauma symptoms make it hard to fulfill current responsibilities. It can also happen when people fall into the common trap of second-guessing what they did or didn't do at the time of the trauma. Many people, in trying to make sense of their experience, blame themselves. This is usually completely unfair. At best, it fails to take into account the other reasons why the events occurred. Self-blame causes a lot of distress and can prevent a person from reaching out for help.

Feeling detached or disconnected from others can happen when a person has difficulty in feeling or expressing positive feelings. After traumas, people can get wrapped up in their problems or feel "numb" and then stop putting time and energy into their relationships with friends and family. Soon, they feel alone because they have isolated themselves from others.

Physical complaints can happen because of long periods of agitation or arousal from anxiety. Trauma survivors may also avoid medical care because it reminds them of the trauma and causes anxiety; this may lead to poorer health. Unhealthy habits used to cope with post-traumatic stress, like drug or excessive alcohol use, can also cause health problems.

Alcohol and/or drug abuse can happen when a person wants to avoid bad feelings that come with post-trauma symptoms or when other things that happened at the time of trauma lead a person to take drugs. This is a common way to cope with upsetting trauma symptoms, but it actually leads to more problems. If you find yourself relying on alcohol or drugs to cope or numb the pain, consult a medical or mental health professional with experience in substance abuse issues.

Although post-trauma symptoms and other trauma-related problems may take up most of a your attention when you are suffering, remember that you also have strengths, interests, commitments, relationships with others, past experiences that were not traumatic, desires, and hopes for the future.

Practical Ways to Cope with Reactions to Trauma

- Physical exercise alternated with relaxation may help with some of the physical reactions. Consult your doctor if they persist.
- Talk to trusted family and friends. Talk can be the most healing medicine.
- Spend time with others. Resist the tendency to isolate yourself.
- Give yourself permission to feel rotten.
- Keep a journal; write your way through sleepless times.
- Don't make major life changes until things settle down.
- Do make as many daily decisions as possible, which will give you a feeling of control over your life.
- Get plenty of rest and eat regular meals, even if you don't feel like it.
- Recurring thoughts, dreams or flashbacks are normal. Don't try to fight them. They will decrease over time and become less painful.