# When Terrible Things Happen - What You May Experience

by SAMHSA

#### **Immediate Reactions**

There are a wide variety of positive and negative reactions that survivors can experience during and immediately after a disaster. These include:

Domain	Negative Responses	Positive Responses
Cognitive	Confusion, disorientation, worry, intrusive	Determination and resolve,
	thoughts and images, self-blame	sharper perception, courage,
		optimism, faith
Emotional	Shock, sorrow, grief, sadness, fear, anger,	Feeling involved, challenged,
	numb, irritability, guilt and shame	mobilized
Social	Extreme withdrawal, interpersonal conflict	Social connectedness,
		altruistic helping behaviors
Physiological	Fatigue, headache, muscle tension, stomach	Alertness, readiness to
	ache, increased heart rate, exaggerated	respond, increased energy
	startle response, difficulties sleeping	

## Common negative reactions that may continue include:

#### Intrusive reactions

- Distressing thoughts or images of the event while awake or dreaming
- Upsetting emotional or physical reactions to reminders of the experience
- Feeling like the experience is happening all over again ("flashback")

### Avoidance and withdrawal reactions

- Avoid talking, thinking, and having feelings about the traumatic event
- Avoid reminders of the event (places and people connected to what happened)
- Restricted emotions; feeling numb
- Feelings of detachment and estrangement from others; social withdrawal
- Loss of interest in usually pleasurable activities

### Physical arousal reactions

- Constantly being "on the lookout" for danger, startling easily, or being jumpy Irritability or outbursts of anger, feeling "on edge"
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep, problems concentrating or paying attention

#### Reactions to trauma and loss reminders

- Reactions to places, people, sights, sounds, smells, and feelings that are reminders of the disaster
- Reminders can bring on distressing mental images, thoughts, and emotional/physical reactions

 Common examples include sudden loud noises, sirens, locations where the disaster occurred, seeing people with disabilities, funerals, anniversaries of the disaster, and television/radio news about the disaster

## Positive changes in priorities, worldview, and expectations

- Enhanced appreciation that family and friends are precious and important
- Meeting the challenge of addressing difficulties (by taking positive action steps, changing the focus of thoughts, using humor, acceptance)
- Shifting expectations about what to expect from day to day and about what is considered a "good day"
- Shifting priorities to focus more on quality time with family or friends
- Increased commitment to self, family, friends, and spiritual/religious faith

## When a Loved One Dies, Common Reactions Include:

- Feeling confused, numb, disbelief, bewildered, or lost
- Feeling angry at the person who died or at people considered responsible for the death
- Strong physical reactions such as nausea, fatigue, shakiness, and muscle weakness
- Feeling guilty for still being alive

## What Helps

- Talking to another person for support or spending time with others
- Engaging in positive distracting activities (sports, hobbies, reading)
- Getting adequate rest and eating healthy meals Trying to maintain a normal schedule
- Scheduling pleasant activities
- Taking breaks
- Reminiscing about a loved one who has died
- Focusing on something practical that you can do now to manage the situation better
- Using relaxation methods (breathing exercises, meditation, calming self-talk, music)
- Participating in a support group Exercising in moderation Keeping a journal
- Seeking counseling

## What Doesn't Help

- Using alcohol or drugs to cope
- Extreme avoidance of thinking or talking about the event or a death of a loved one
- Violence or conflict Overeating or failing to eat
- Excessive TV or computer games
- Blaming others
- Working too much
- Extreme withdrawal from family or friends
- Not taking care of yourself
- Doing risky things (driving recklessly, substance abuse, not taking adequate precautions)
- Withdrawing from pleasant activities