

# Immediate and Delayed Reactions to Trauma

## Immediate Emotional Reactions

Numbness and detachment  
 Anxiety or severe fear  
 Guilt (including survivor guilt)  
 Exhilaration as a result of surviving  
 Anger  
 Sadness  
 Helplessness  
 Feeling unreal; depersonalization (e.g., feeling as if you are watching yourself)  
 Disorientation  
 Feeling out of control  
 Denial  
 Constriction of feelings  
 Feeling overwhelmed

## Delayed Emotional Reactions

Irritability and/or hostility  
 Depression  
 Mood swings, instability  
 Anxiety (e.g., phobia, generalized anxiety)  
 Fear of trauma recurrence  
 Grief reactions  
 Shame  
 Feelings of fragility and/or vulnerability  
 Emotional detachment from anything that requires emotional reactions (e.g., significant and/or family relationships, conversations about self, discussion of traumatic events or reactions to them)

## Immediate Physical Reactions

Nausea and/or gastrointestinal distress  
 Sweating or shivering  
 Faintness  
 Muscle tremors or uncontrollable shaking  
 Elevated heartbeat, respiration, and blood pressure  
 Extreme fatigue or exhaustion  
 Greater startle responses  
 Depersonalization

## Delayed Physical Reactions

Sleep disturbances, nightmares  
 Somatization (e.g., increased focus on and worry about body aches and pains)  
 Appetite and digestive changes  
 Lowered resistance to colds and infection  
 Persistent fatigue  
 Elevated cortisol levels  
 Hyperarousal  
 Long-term health effects including heart, liver, autoimmune, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease

## Immediate Cognitive Reactions

Difficulty concentrating  
 Rumination or racing thoughts (e.g., replaying the traumatic event over and over again)  
 Distortion of time and space (e.g., traumatic event may be perceived as if it was happening in slow motion, or a few seconds can be perceived as minutes)  
 Memory problems (e.g., not being able to recall important aspects of the trauma)  
 Strong identification with victims

## Delayed Cognitive Reactions

Intrusive memories or flashbacks  
 Reactivation of previous traumatic events  
 Self-blame  
 Preoccupation with event  
 Difficulty making decisions  
 Magical thinking: belief that certain behaviors, including avoidant behavior, will protect against future trauma  
 Belief that feelings or memories are dangerous  
 Generalization of triggers (e.g., a person who experiences a home invasion during the daytime may avoid being alone during the day)  
 Suicidal thinking

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<p><b>Immediate Behavioral Reactions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Startled reaction</li> <li>Restlessness</li> <li>Sleep and appetite disturbances</li> <li>Difficulty expressing oneself</li> <li>Argumentative behavior</li> <li>Increased use of alcohol, drugs, and tobacco</li> <li>Withdrawal and apathy</li> <li>Avoidant behaviors</li> </ul>	<p><b>Delayed Behavioral Reactions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Avoidance of event reminders</li> <li>Social relationship disturbances</li> <li>Decreased activity level</li> <li>Engagement in high-risk behaviors</li> <li>Increased use of alcohol and drugs</li> <li>Withdrawal</li> </ul>
<p><b>Immediate Existential Reactions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intense use of prayer</li> <li>Restoration of faith in the goodness of others (e.g., receiving help from others)</li> <li>Loss of self-efficacy</li> <li>Despair about humanity, particularly if the event was intentional</li> <li>Immediate disruption of life assumptions (e.g., fairness, safety, goodness, predictability of life)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Delayed Existential Reactions</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Questioning (e.g., “Why me?”)</li> <li>Increased cynicism, disillusionment</li> <li>Increased self-confidence (e.g., “If I can survive this, I can survive anything”)</li> <li>Loss of purpose</li> <li>Renewed faith</li> <li>Hopelessness</li> <li>Reestablishing priorities</li> <li>Redefining meaning and importance of life</li> <li>Reworking life’s assumptions to accommodate the trauma (e.g., taking a self-defense class to reestablish a sense of safety)</li> </ul>