

Emotional Responses to Trauma

A person who goes through a traumatic event may have quite a few feelings and reactions to what has happened to them. These changes in how you act and how you feel can last from hours to weeks and be difficult and confusing. Generally, people go through different stages and you may experience some or all of the different reactions that are described.

Shock Stage: This stage usually happens first and can last a few hours or longer. During this time, you may feel frozen or stuck, and things may not seem real or feel like they are happening to someone else. You may have trouble remembering how to do things or you might have trouble concentrating, even on things that usually come easily or that you have done many times. You may convince yourself (or at least try to) that the event didn't happen and "force" yourself to act normal. You might tell yourself that what happened *was not* "a big deal," but how you feel and what you do tell you that it *was* "a big deal."

Impact Stage: This follows the shock stage and can last for a few days or even weeks. The first sign is usually feeling uptight, jittery or scared, you have feelings of anxiety or nervousness and you might not be sure where they are coming from. Anger can also occur. You might feel angry at the person who caused the trauma, the people who were there and didn't help, the police, or friends who don't understand. You could feel intense anger or rage and even have thoughts of revenge. Many times, people who have experienced trauma begin to second-guess what they did or didn't do during the event. They may think, "What if I had done this or that?" "What ifs" tend to confuse us about what really happened and can cause feelings of guilt, helplessness, anger and sadness. Self doubts can lead to depression, which involves feelings of worthlessness or guilt. Many times, people may suddenly feel like crying, feel helpless and have trouble sleeping. Some people feel like they are on a roller coaster and go from being very angry to very sad in a matter of minutes.

Resolution Stage: This stage may last from weeks to months. An important step is recognizing that you did the best that you could during the traumatic event and the responsibility for what happened is not yours. You can learn that it is normal human behavior to be frightened, angry and sad when experiencing trauma, and that it's okay to feel that way. Talking about your feelings and facing your self-blaming thoughts can also be very helpful in feeling better and growing from the event.

You will always remember what happened and how you felt. Sometimes people or things that remind you of the trauma can cause the feelings described above to come back. Talk about these feelings with friends, family or people who were there during the trauma. Sharing your thoughts can help your feelings of helplessness and confusion.

Stress after a trauma is common. If you have a medical condition and it feels like it is getting worse, contact your doctor or a local health clinic for help.