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:

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

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