

Posttraumatic Stress Reactions

What You Should Know

Following disasters, people with posttraumatic stress reactions have four different types of reactions: **re-experiencing**, **avoidance**, **numbing**, and **activation**.

Re-experiencing reactions can include:

- Unwanted memories of the disaster that seem to come out of the blue
- A strong memory being triggered by something, like watching a television show about a disaster, a storm coming, a smell of something related, or the anniversary of the disaster
- Nightmares and flashbacks—strong memories that make you feel as if the disaster is happening again
- Intense bodily reactions like a racing heart, sweating, or shaking, or strong emotional reactions

Avoidance reactions can include:

- Not talking about what happened because it upsets you
- Avoiding situations that remind you of the disaster, such as watching the news or going back to the place where the disaster occurred
- Avoiding other places/situations indirectly related to the disaster, such as avoiding crowds because you worry you won't be able to escape

Numbing reactions can include:

- Feeling distant or detached from other people, even people you love
- Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Blocking out painful thoughts or feelings or not remembering parts of what happened (feeling down and withdrawing from others may go along with this reaction)

Activation reactions can include:

- Feeling keyed up and jumpy
- Being irritable
- Being easily startled
- Feeling overly watchful and on edge
- Having trouble sleeping or concentrating

What Can Help

You can learn to gradually manage posttraumatic stress reactions. Healing doesn't mean you'll completely forget the experience or that you won't have emotional pain when remembering, but it may mean having a greater ability to manage distressing emotions and greater confidence in your ability to cope.

Choose from the list below the coping methods you are willing to try:

- **Remind yourself that posttraumatic stress reactions are common.** Know that you're not alone, weak, or "crazy."
- **Practice ways to manage reactions.** Try calming strategies, such as breathing exercises, writing about your feelings and thoughts, meditation, exercise, stretching, yoga, prayer, listening to quiet music, or

spending time outdoors. These activities can improve your mood and reduce your anxiety. Make a plan for coping with stressful situations or triggers that will make you feel more in control of your reactions.

- **Practice helpful thinking.** Check out your thoughts. Are they negative and unhelpful? If so, they may be causing your upset feelings. Develop a plan to substitute helpful thoughts. For example, if you find yourself thinking, “I can’t do it,” challenge yourself with questions such as:
 - “Is it true that I can’t do it?”
 - “Is it ALWAYS true?”
 - “Under what circumstances COULD I do it?”
 - “Could I do it if I had some help?”

Then you can deliberately substitute a helpful thought. In this case, you might say to yourself, “With the right help, I can get through this.”

- **Do fun or meaningful activities.** Distract yourself from your reactions by engaging in hobbies, helping others, re-establishing family routines, and participating in satisfying activities.
- **Spend time with others.** Being with family, friends, or others in your community may help reduce your sense of isolation, rebuild trust in others, and provide an opportunity to contribute to others’ well-being.
- **Avoid using alcohol or drugs to cope with your reactions.** Alcohol and other drugs—while they seem to help in the short term—always make things worse in the long term. If you need to, join an alcohol or drug treatment program.
- **Call a counselor for help.** If your reactions continue or increase, contact this program or another program for further assistance.