
COMMON REACTIONS TO STRESS OR TRAUMA

There are many different ways that young people react to stressful life events. Below we've listed several kinds of reactions, all of which are very common. We've asked your child to show this list to you and to talk with you about which ones he or she has had problems with recently. You might also notice the way that you've reacted to stressful events in your own life. Feel free to call us if you have any questions about these problems or the way in which the group will address them.

Having nightmares or trouble sleeping. When something really scary or upsetting happens, it takes awhile to figure out exactly what happened and what it means. After severe stress or trauma, people tend to keep thinking about what happened in order to "digest" it, just like your stomach has to work to digest a big meal. Nightmares are one way of digesting what happened.

Thinking about it all the time. This is another way to digest what happened. Just like nightmares, thinking about the trauma all the time is a problem because it makes you feel upset. It can be unpleasant.

Wanting to NOT think or talk about it. This is natural, since it is upsetting to think about a past stress or trauma, and it can make you feel all sorts of emotions. Avoiding it makes things easier, but only for a little while. It's important to digest what happened sooner or later. So, while avoiding it sometimes makes sense, you have to set aside some time to digest it also.

Avoiding places, people, or things that make you think about it. Just like not wanting to talk about or think about the trauma, avoiding situations that remind you of what happened can help you feel better right then. The problem with this, though, is that it keeps you from do-

ing normal things that are an important part of your life.

Feeling scared for no reason. Sometimes this happens because you remember what happened to you, or you are thinking about what happened. Other times it happens because your body is so tense all the time that you just start feeling scared.

Feeling "crazy" or out of control. If all of these things are problems for you, you can start to feel really out of control or even crazy. Don't worry, though; these problems don't mean that you are going crazy. They are all common reactions to stress or trauma.

Not being able to remember parts of what happened. This happens to a lot of people. The stressful event can be so awful that your memory doesn't work the way it usually does. Sometimes it gets easier to remember it later on, and sometimes it gets harder. This can be frustrating, but it's really normal.

Having trouble concentrating at school or at home. With all the nervousness you are feeling and all the time you are spending thinking about what happened, it can be hard to concentrate on school work or even what your friends or family say to you.

© 2004 by Sopris West Educational Services. This page may be photocopied.

Being on guard to protect yourself; feeling like something bad is about to happen. After something bad happens to you, it makes sense to be prepared for another bad thing to happen. The problem with this is that you can spend so much time waiting for the next bad thing to happen that you don't have time or energy for other things in your life. Also, it is scary to think something bad is going to happen all the time.

Jumping when there is a loud noise. This is another way to say that your body is prepared for action, in case something else happens.

Feeling anger. Sometimes people feel angry about the stress or trauma that happened, or the things that happened afterward. Other times, people just feel angry all the time, at everything and everybody.

Feeling shame. Sometimes people are ashamed about what happened to them, or how they acted. Even though it's hard to believe, this gets better the more that you talk about what happened. If you keep it a secret, it's hard for the shame to go away.

Feeling guilt. People can feel guilty about what happened or about something they did or did not do. Sometimes you blame yourself for things that you couldn't control. You may also feel guilty for upsetting other people. Guilty feelings can make it hard to talk about what happened.

Feeling sadness/grief/loss. Sometimes stress events include losing someone close to you or losing something that is important to you. This makes you feel sad and down.

Feeling bad about yourself. Sometimes, all this stress can make you feel really bad about yourself, like you're a bad person or that no one likes you. This makes it harder to be friendly and to have fun with others.

Having physical health problems and complaints. Stress has an effect on your body as well. People tend to get sick more often and to notice pain and discomfort more often when they have been under stress.