

■ When Terrible Things Happen — What You May Experience

Immediate Reactions

There are a wide variety of positive and negative reactions that survivors can experience during and immediately after a disaster. These include:

Domain	Negative Responses	Positive Responses
Cognitive	Confusion, disorientation, worry, intrusive thoughts and images, self-blame	Determination and resolve, sharper perception, courage, optimism, faith
Emotional	Shock, sorrow, grief, sadness, fear, anger, numb, irritability, guilt and shame	Feeling involved, challenged, mobilized
Social	Extreme withdrawal, interpersonal conflict	Social connectedness, altruistic helping behaviors
Physiological	Fatigue, headache, muscle tension, stomachache, increased heart rate, exaggerated startle response, difficulties sleeping	Alertness, readiness to respond, increased energy
Spiritual/ Existential	Loss of meaning and purpose, anger at God, feeling separate from faith community, anger at injustice, difficulty trusting God	Showing compassion to others, feeling unity or community with others, a renewed sense of spirituality or reliance on faith, a deepened sense of purpose, a shift in priorities

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