Common reactions to trauma

The reactions people commonly have after a frightening or overwhelming event.

After something frightening, shocking or overwhelming, most people have strong reactions. They are a normal response to what happened. They do not mean you are weak or going mad.

Memories that push in

Images, sounds or smells that come back uninvited. Nightmares. Feeling as if it is happening again.

Being on guard

Jumpy, easily startled, scanning for danger, unable to relax, poor sleep, short temper.

Avoiding

Staying away from places, people or conversations linked to what happened. Keeping busy so you do not have to think.

Numbness and distance

Feeling flat, cut off from others, unreal, or as if you are watching life from outside.

Strong feelings

Fear, anger, sadness, guilt or shame, sometimes all in one day.

Changes in the body

Tension, headaches, stomach upset, exhaustion, a racing heart.

Changes in thinking

Poor concentration and memory. Blaming yourself. Seeing the world as dangerous or people as untrustworthy.

Changes in what you do

Withdrawing, drinking more, working all hours, losing interest in things.

What usually happens

For most people these reactions ease over the first few weeks, especially with support, rest and a return to routine. Expect good days and bad days along the way.

What helps in the early weeks

- Stay connected with people you trust, even if you do not want to talk about it.
- Keep to ordinary routines: meals, sleep, movement.
- Let yourself feel what you feel, in small doses.
- Go easy on alcohol. It gets in the way of the mind's natural processing.

When to look for more help

If the reactions are still strong after about a month, are getting worse, or are stopping you from living your life, talk to your GP or a therapist. Effective treatments exist.

My notes and questions

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.