
Survivor reactions to traumatic events

Summary

- Surviving a traumatic event, even if you weren't physically harmed, can still cause emotional harm.
 - Any survivor of a traumatic event can have an emotional response — including helpers, witnesses, emergency first responders, families and healthcare providers.
 - Early support from a trained professional can help prevent complications arising from reactions to surviving a traumatic event.
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Surviving a traumatic event

When a traumatic event occurs, surviving the event may depend on past training, experience or fast reactions. Or it may come down to where you happened to be in relation to the danger as the event unfolded.

If you have survived a traumatic event, whether you were injured or physically unharmed, it is important to recognise that trauma also causes emotional harm. Survival is often associated with complex emotional reactions that cause distress and make it hard to resume everyday life after the event. These are known as 'survivor reactions'.

What are common survivor reactions to a traumatic event?

You could be feeling a number of common emotional responses as a survivor of a traumatic event:

- **guilt and blame** – feeling that somehow your survival is at the expense of those who died or were injured
- **unworthiness** – feeling that people should be spared because they are special, good, worthy or have some special gift – and feeling that those conditions don't apply to you
- **I should not have survived** – feeling that you should have died along with the others and should not be alive, making you feel unable to resume your old life
- **loss of connection to your old life** – a dramatic, unusual event does not fit into the life you were living previously and you do not feel able to go back to ordinary every day concerns when so many other lives are permanently altered
- **disorientation** – the feeling of not knowing what it all means as you have never before had a similar experience
- **a positive reaction** – you may find that the experience of survival has a dramatic positive effect on you, making you feel that:
 - life has new meaning (perhaps the event has inspired or strengthened humanitarian or spiritual values)
 - you appreciate everyday things and no longer take them for granted
 - you have a renewed sense of purpose to make the best use of the time available to you
 - you have an increased appreciation of your relationships with family and friends
 - you value community more strongly.

Any survivor of a traumatic incident can experience these feelings, including helpers, witnesses, emergency first responders, families and healthcare providers.

Why do feelings of guilt and unworthiness develop?

Members of a community take care of each other by being considerate, polite and abiding by social rules even when they do not know each other. During day to day life this bond between people sits in the background.

When something goes wrong, the bond people feel for each other comes into the foreground. They rush to help

anyone in need regardless of whether they know them or not. They are caring and concerned, showing the underlying emotional involvement with other people that holds society together.

If you have seen others die or become injured, or tried to help someone during a traumatic event, your bond with them can become emotionally energised and can feel as strong as the bond you have to the people closest to you. You may, therefore, feel strongly attached to the other people involved in the event. Consequently, you may have a similar emotional reaction to their death or injury as you would to that of a close friend or family member.

A common reaction to the death or injury of someone you are strongly connected to is feelings of guilt and unworthiness: that you should have suffered or died instead.

Why you may feel disconnected from your old life after a traumatic event

Close involvement with death and injury can evoke significant and overwhelming emotional reactions that make it hard to feel motivated to go back to routine tasks. These emotions are unfamiliar, strong and demand attention, but have no connection to your everyday life.

As a result, your old life no longer seems to have the same importance as before. If there is no way of expressing or understanding the complex feelings that you are having, it can lead to a sense of disorientation and lost connection with your old life.

When to seek help for survivor reactions to a traumatic event

Survivor reactions are a normal consequence of being involved in a traumatic event. However, if they do not resolve after a few weeks, considerable distress may result and for some people this can lead to mental health problems (or worsen mental health problems that they already had before the event).

Early support from trained professionals can prevent complications and help the recovery process. Seek professional help if:

- your reactions are interfering with your day-to-day life and relationships
- the event does not seem to fade and your feelings about it are not subsiding
- no matter how you look at it, the event doesn't make sense
- you are experiencing loss of interest in previously enjoyable or meaningful activities
- you are isolating yourself
- you are having difficulties with sleeping, eating, your mood, relationships, work or leisure
- you are having thoughts of self-punishment or self-harm, or taking risks you wouldn't normally take.

Self-help for survivor reactions

If you are experiencing survivor reactions to a traumatic event:

- Talk to supportive people who will not express judgement. Explaining your emotions may help you to step back and get things into perspective.
- Don't try to talk yourself out of your reactions – accept them and try to understand them, but be aware that logical thinking may not help in overcoming an emotional response to a traumatic event.
- Accept that you are 'only human'. All anyone can do in an emergency is what the situation allows.
- Try not to compare yourself with others – everyone is different. Instead, try to evaluate your situation on its own merits.
- Don't try to 'work off' guilt by setting high standards of achievement as it rarely eases feelings of unworthiness. Instead, try to confront what is driving your feelings.
- Try to accept the experience as part of life's journey rather than a problem you have to solve or explain.

Where to get help for survivor reactions

- Your GP
- Mental health specialist, such as a psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker
- Community health centre
- **Phoenix Australia** Centre for Post-traumatic Mental Health Tel. (03) 9035 5599

General telephone counselling services can provide advice:

- **Lifeline** Tel. 13 11 14
- **GriefLine** Tel. 1300 845 745
- **beyondblue** Tel. 1300 22 4636
- **Kids Helpline** Tel. 1800 55 1800

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