

Glossary of Typical Emotional States

BY ALI GHEITH

11

The following glossary terms might help you recognize some of the most typical emotional reactions to trauma.

Anger

This is a very complex emotion, but it is related to frustration and comes about when people are denied something of great importance to them. This is why frustration often turns to anger, as a next step in the escalation of a conflict between people's goals or needs and their circumstances. Anger is a more energetic emotion than frustration and has the advantage of making the person feel some power to overcome the situation. At its worst, anger makes us feel like annihilating or eliminating those who obstruct us from our goals, and for this reason people are often embarrassed to talk about or even admit their anger. This can appear to be a very irrational response because it is also the most misunderstood emotion. Anger does not have to make sense. It just happens to motivate us to overcome threats to our survival or our well-being.

That is why people can be angry at a dead loved one for abandoning them or at an earthquake for causing such destruction.

Anxiety

Anxiety is usually a more diffuse, less intense form of fear. While it is always focused on unpleasant future outcomes, there may be no specific target for the anxiety. Anxiety can be expressed in restlessness (agitation), panicky feelings, or an inability to act (indecision). Unrelieved anxiety can become paralyzing, because it may prevent people from doing things that were previously a natural part of their daily routine. Chronic anxiety is very bad for the body as well and may lead to symptoms of physical illness.

Blame

This is when people feel at least partly responsible for bad things happening. People are blamed for not preventing or foreseeing the event or for not having helped others enough. People fear blame because it lowers them in the eyes of others, which is very painful. In most cases, feeling that you or others are to blame requires that there was some power or opportunity to have acted differently and that the outcome of those acts was predictable.

Depression

Pervasive feelings of hopelessness and despair, unshakable feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy, withdrawal from others, inability to engage in productive activity.

Disorientation

Daze, memory loss, inability to give date or time, state where he or she is, recall events of the past 24 hours or understand what is happening.

Dread

Disasters can give people cause for dread as they look into a future that includes unpleasant events, like burials, relocating from their communities or otherwise rebuilding their lives.

Fear

People often feel afraid if they are suddenly faced with something they think might harm them. This emotion is so powerful that it usually captures the full attention, leaving very little reserve for coping with anything else (also known as terror). The object of the fear is not always visible. The fear might also be concerned with the surroundings; fear of being left alone, fear for the loved ones' lives, fear that the event will happen again, or that it will never be overcome. Fear can leave such a strong imprint on a person that they are permanently changed by it. Chronic fear can lead to panic or emotional collapse.

Frustration

When people try to accomplish something and encounter an obstacle, they experience an emotional reaction called frustration. It is a form of anger. This emotion signals to the person that they must adjust in some way to the presence of the obstacle, usually by increasing their effort or trying something else. Unrelieved frustration leads either to heightened anger or the onset of depression.

Grief and mourning

People who have suffered a loss, especially of a loved one, experience a very painful reaction that interferes with their ability to go on with their lives. These emotions are so powerful that they seem impossible to hide. People have been known to show physical symptoms, such as shortness of breath, irregular heartbeat and fainting. Mourning often refers to the expressive or ritual behavior engaged in by grieving people or communities. Expressive rituals can be helpful or necessary for relieving these feelings.

Guilt

Guilt is felt when something unfair has happened for which the person was at least partly responsible. Often people feel guilty for not preventing or foreseeing the event or for not having helped others enough. Guilt may also be felt for not having expressed the right things to people before it was too late. One may also feel guilty for being in a more fortunate situation than others, again because it seems unfair. A specific kind of guilt found after disasters is called “survivor’s guilt”, in which a person feels guilty for having survived when others did not. Sometimes people feel guilty that they could not prevent the event, even though they realize that this is irrational. In this case the guilt expresses a wish to have acted differently or to have created a better outcome.

Loss

The name of this feeling actually describes the situation, for the person is reacting to losing something or someone. It is similar to grief or mourning and, this emotion robs people of energy and leaves them feeling empty inside, as though something is missing. It is common for such a person to think almost exclusively about that which they feel is lost, and to wish for its return.

Regret

This is a painful feeling resulting from reflecting on a past decision or behavior. People often feel some kind of regret after a disaster because they see how they might have chosen differently, though they may have had no way of knowing at the time. This can be seen as a way of wishing to have been more powerful in the face of overwhelming circumstances.

Sadness

These feelings share similarities with regret and grief and reveal a person who is mourning some loss. It is easy to recognize sadness because the person lacks energy and appears physically sunken in their face and posture.

Shame

Unlike guilt, shame does not focus on an unfair situation or misdeed, but rather is a person’s feeling of being completely bad or inadequate in the eyes of others. A person who feels this way will find it very hard to talk about it, because he/she feels undeserving of being cared for or understood by others. Sometimes people feel shameful about how they behaved in the event, even though this may be unfounded. In this case the shame expresses a sense of personal inadequacy.

Vulnerability

When people are hurt physically and psychologically, they feel fragile or insecure. This means that they easily misinterpret their surroundings and that they generally feel misunderstood and betrayed. They may be low on patience and easily irritated.^{10 11}

¹⁰ International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Psychological Support: best practices from Red Cross and red Crescent program

¹¹ SAMHSA Field Manual for Mental Health and Human Service Working in Major Disasters