

# COMMON RESPONSES TO POLITICALLY-BASED TRAUMA

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## INTRODUCTION

Politically-based trauma affects both the individuals directly involved and the community at large. A politically-based trauma would be an event that people with political power do to people they are responsible to. For example, when youth lack legal representation during a county judicial hearing and are subsequently ordered into juvenile placements for what appear to be insufficient reasons,

Politically-based trauma, as with all traumatic life events, involves events that are outside the realm of expected and socially acceptable norms, which are stressful, painful, and disruptive to the lives of those affected. In this way, politically based trauma shares some features of a disaster, even though it is not a physical disaster such as a hurricane or terrorist attack. Politically based trauma also shares some similarities to a death or loss, since trauma damages one's sense of safety, trust, and connection to others.

There is a range of potential responses to trauma, and it is helpful to understand that such responses tend to be predictable and then run their course, with healing over time. Trauma responses are time-specific, with certain responses at the time of the event and immediately afterwards, followed by different responses in the intermediary period (although the initial responses may also persist), and then different responses at the time of resolution. A typical sequence may involve the following.

## INITIAL EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

- Disorientation and disbelief
- Fear
- Uncertainty
- Insecurity
- Diminished coping

## INTERMEDIATE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES

- Anger
- Possible rage
- Disempowerment
- Sense of betrayal
- Loss of self-confidence
- Loss of trust, with possible cynicism
- Alienation from traditional social institutions, political leaders, and others
- Irritability
- Sadness
- Sense of loss

## **LATER STAGE EMOTIONAL RESPONSES (RESOLUTION)**

- Understanding and perspective about the event
- Diminution of earlier, extreme emotions
- Sense of resignation and/or vindication
- Increased self confidence, with restoration of coping skills
- Increased connection to others
- More positive view of the future
- Possible personal sense of purpose for the future

## **ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS**

All of the above responses can be regarded as normal, if not too extreme. As such, they may not require formal professional intervention. Professionals should accept responses & support the person (e.g., be “trauma informed”)

A person’s individual response will be based on many factors, including:

- Degree to which directly affected (e.g., youth placed, or family of youth placed)
- Age of individual and nature of coping skills
- Extent of past exposure to traumatic events
- Nature of support system, including family and community

Responses by members of community as a whole may be influenced by the following:

- Extent to which the traumatic event is in the news
- Nature of legal proceedings, and ultimate outcome of legal proceedings

## **MENTAL HEALTH CONSULTATION MAY BE APPROPRIATE WHEN THE FOLLOWING RESPONSES OCCUR:**

- Sustained anxiety, crying, or depression
- Difficulty sleeping
- Irritability, anger, a startle response, physical threats, or physical aggression
- Constant intrusion of thoughts about the traumatic event
- Avoidance of people, usual activities, and routines and/or numbness
- Multiple physical symptoms (headache, stomach ache, back pain, etc.)
- Reliance on alcohol or drugs to cope
- Dangerous, impulsive behavior
- Suicidal thinking or behavior
- Emergence of hallucinations and/or delusions

## **REFERENCES**

1. National Child Traumatic Stress Network ([www.nctsnet.org](http://www.nctsnet.org))
2. National GAINS Center ([www.gainscenter.samhsa.gov/atc/resources.htm](http://www.gainscenter.samhsa.gov/atc/resources.htm))

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