



A guide for coping with traumatic events

Traumatic events are often unexpected, and navigating the aftermath can be a difficult journey.

Traumatic experiences are upsetting, and they can cause fear, distress and an overwhelming sense of stress. It is not uncommon for most adults to encounter one or more traumatic events in their lifetime. Sadly, traumatic events are not always limited to a singular event. They can be chronic, meaning that similar events persist over extended periods.

Immediate reactions following trauma are complicated and influenced by the person's history, the availability of support systems, coping skills, family dynamics and how their community responds. While reactions range in severity, even the most acute responses are natural as the person instinctively seeks to manage their trauma.

There are many different types of traumatic events, including:

- Arson or house fires
- Domestic violence
- Combat or war zone exposure
- Natural disasters
- Physical or sexual abuse
- Seeing death or dead bodies, including while at work
- Serious medical events
- Serious vehicle accidents
- Terrorism or mass violence
- Unexpected death of a loved one
- Witnessing or experiencing violence, such as a homicide or suicide

This guide contains tips to help people learn more about reactions to traumatic events, how to recover from adversity, how to help others and treatment options to help people heal.

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Sources: Healthwise, Psych Central, SAMHSA

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Traumatic events: Emotional and physical reactions

Traumatic experiences can trigger a cascade of intense emotional and physical symptoms that are hard for people to manage. It is common for people to feel stunned, disoriented and unable to process the distressing information they have encountered.

Emotional reactions

Emotional reactions to trauma are diverse and deeply personal, influenced by the individual's background and past experiences. Beyond the initial shock, many emotions surface, including anger, fear, sadness and shame. However, identifying and acknowledging these feelings can prove challenging for various reasons. Some individuals may lack prior exposure to emotional expression in their family or community while others may associate strong emotions with past trauma, feeling a loss of control. Others may go into denial or emotional numbness that may obscure their underlying feelings about the event.

Common emotional reactions may include a wide range of experiences such as:

- Anxiety and fear that may surface in waves, at unpredictable times
- Flashbacks and nightmares, regurgitating the trauma
- Sadness and depression stemming from profound loss and despair
- Guilt, shame or a sense of hopelessness
- Anger and irritability, as emotions go up and down
- Emotional numbness and feelings of disconnection from others
- Feelings of helplessness and vulnerability
- Heightened alertness and startle responses
- Difficulty concentrating
- Emotional outbursts, reflecting internal turmoil

Physical reactions

Physical reactions result from stress hormones flooding the nervous system, and they mimic the sensations of physical injury or illness such as:

- Sleep disturbances, including difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Persistent fatigue, even after resting
- Headaches, stomachaches or bodily pain
- Racing heart or palpitations
- Dizziness or feelings of faintness
- Changes in appetite, either increase or decrease

The intensity and frequency of these unsettling thoughts, feelings and physical reactions typically diminish in the days and weeks following the event. However, the journey toward healing is deeply individual and it requires patience, self-compassion and support.

Understanding post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Post-traumatic stress disorder, commonly known as PTSD, is a strong and enduring emotional reaction triggered by an exceptionally disturbing event, such as war, a violent crime or a natural disaster.

It is normal for individuals to experience feelings of fear, confusion or anger in the aftermath of such events. However, if these emotions persist or intensify over time, they may be an indicator of PTSD. Symptoms include recurring nightmares or flashbacks of the traumatic event, difficulty in expressing emotions towards loved ones and heightened irritability or vigilance.

The impact of PTSD extends beyond emotional distress, affecting behavior and daily life. Individuals may withdraw from social interactions, engage in excessive work or resort to substance misuse as a coping mechanism. Intimate relationships may suffer, and conflicts within families can arise. Additionally, depression and panic attacks may accompany PTSD, further complicating the recovery process.

How does PTSD develop?

All people with PTSD have personally experienced—or have experienced through others—a traumatic event that caused them to fear for their lives, see horrible things and feel helpless. Strong emotions caused by the event create changes in the brain that may result in PTSD.

While many people who go through a traumatic event do not develop PTSD, the likelihood of its occurrence depends on various factors, including:

- Severity of the trauma
- Personal losses or injuries suffered
- Proximity to the event
- Individual reactions and perceived control over the situation
- Availability of support and assistance post-event
- Pre-existing mental health conditions, substance abuse history, or childhood trauma, which may elevate the risk of developing PTSD

PTSD symptoms typically start soon after the traumatic event, though they may surface months or even years later. They also may come and go over many years. Approximately half of the individuals with PTSD experience improvement over time, while others may continue to struggle with symptoms indefinitely.

Seeking support

It is essential to recognize that PTSD symptoms do not need to interfere with daily functioning, work or relationships. It is never too late to get professional help or other forms of support. Seeking assistance, regardless of how much time has passed since the traumatic event, is a crucial step toward healing and reclaiming a sense of wellbeing.

10 strategies to initiate the healing journey

When a person experiences an event that endangers their life or the life of others, their body goes into emergency mode. This state of heightened arousal triggers internal alarms and provides a burst of energy to increase their chances of survival.

Usually, individuals exit this emergency mode soon after the threat has passed. However, some individuals may find themselves frequently returning to it, particularly when unexpected triggers occur. This prolonged state of heightened arousal can deplete their vital energy resources, resulting in a state of exhaustion.

The body's natural healing process involves gradually returning to a state of stability, with the internal alarms switching off, and energy levels normalizing. This transition should ideally happen within a month following the traumatic event.

Here are some strategies to alleviate traumatic stress reactions and initiate the healing journey:

- 1. Process your thoughts:** It is normal to switch into survival mode, making it challenging to process what happened. However, acknowledging and understanding the impact of the event is one of the healthiest things people can do.
- 2. Connect with people:** Establishing a support system is vital for emotional wellbeing. Emotional support helps us feel less alone or overwhelmed by what has happened in our lives. Sharing feelings can provide affirmation and aid in coping with challenges, whether it is speaking with someone who has undergone similar experiences or a caring individual.
- 3. Volunteer:** Engaging in volunteer activities helps others and empowers individuals by challenging feelings of helplessness often associated with trauma.
- 4. Avoid comparisons:** Resist the temptation to downplay experiences by comparing them to others. Each person's experience of trauma is unique and valid, regardless of how it may compare to others.
- 5. Prioritize physical health:** Stress and trauma impact both mental and physical health. Taking care of the body through proper nutrition, adequate sleep, regular exercise and mindful movement can aid in the healing process. Moving the body daily, even for just a few minutes of stretching, is particularly helpful in healing trauma.
- 6. Limit media exposure:** Excessive exposure to distressing news can exacerbate trauma symptoms. Consider reducing media consumption if it is causing distress.
- 7. Practice mindful breathing:** When feeling overwhelmed, practicing mindful breathing is a quick way to restore calmness and clarity of mind.
- 8. Be compassionate toward yourself:** Dealing with trauma requires patience and self-compassion. It is typical to be frustrated with yourself during what can sometimes feel like a slow recovery process. Avoid setting unrealistic expectations and acknowledge your resilience in navigating through difficult times.
- 9. Understand healing takes time:** Recovery from trauma is not a linear process, and setbacks are normal. Embrace the journey, take it one step at a time, and refrain from putting pressure on yourself to heal quickly.
- 10. Seek support:** Asking for assistance is a sign of strength, not weakness. People may feel bad because everyone else seems to be doing well. What others experience and how they deal with it does not matter. If someone is struggling, they should get help as soon as possible.

Remember, healing from trauma is a gradual process that varies for everyone. By employing these strategies and seeking support when necessary, individuals can navigate the path toward recovery with resilience and compassion.

Supporting others through trauma

It is challenging to witness someone you care about struggling with the effects of trauma. Here are some tips to help provide support:

Give them space and time

Allow the individual to open up at their own pace. Do not pressure them or rush them. Even if they choose not to talk about it, you can show your support in other ways such as spending time with them, having conversations about other topics, and offering practical help. Encourage them to interact socially to avoid isolation, which can make things worse. If they want to be alone, respect their privacy, but gently encourage them to spend some time with others each day. Remember that discussing trauma can be emotionally draining, so allow them to express their feelings and do not feel like you need to fix everything right away.

Focus on listening

It is important to focus on listening when someone is sharing their feelings with you. Practice active listening by paying attention to them and validating their emotions without judgment. Avoid bombarding them with questions or interjecting with your own experiences. Also, refrain from offering simple reassurances or comparing their situation to others. Instead, acknowledge their pain and hardship with statements like, "This must be incredibly difficult for you," or "I'm here for you during this tough time."

Identify triggers

Ask if certain situations or conversations trigger distressing memories or emotions. Understanding their triggers can help you avoid inadvertently causing discomfort and be better prepared to support them during difficult moments, such as flashbacks.

Avoid judgment

It is natural to struggle to comprehend the lasting impact of trauma if you have not experienced it yourself. It is important to avoid passing judgment or pressuring the person to "move on." Instead, offer empathy and reassurance that you believe them and are there to support them. Offer advice only if requested, as they may simply need validation and understanding.

Offer practical assistance

Individuals experiencing trauma may struggle with concentration and focus, so offering practical assistance with daily tasks such as meal preparation, grocery shopping or cleaning can alleviate some of their burdens.

Respect their privacy

Respect their boundaries and refrain from sharing details of their experiences without their consent. Be mindful of their need for privacy and confidentiality, especially when discussing sensitive matters with mutual acquaintances or family members.

By offering compassionate support and respecting their autonomy, you can provide invaluable assistance to your loved one as they navigate through their healing journey.

Treatment options for psychological and emotional trauma

Healing from psychological and emotional trauma involves resolving unpleasant feelings and memories that have been avoided, releasing pent-up “fight-or-flight” energy, learning to regulate intense emotions, and rebuilding trust in others. A trauma specialist may use various therapy approaches tailored to your individual needs.

Somatic Experiencing

This approach focuses on bodily sensations rather than thoughts or memories related to the traumatic event. By attending to bodily experiences, individuals can release stored trauma energy through techniques such as shaking or crying and other forms of physical release.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

EMDR integrates cognitive-behavioral therapy with bilateral stimulation, such as eye movements, to facilitate the processing and desensitization of traumatic memories.

Counseling

Counseling offers a supportive environment to explore thoughts and coping strategies. CBT, a common counseling approach, helps individuals understand and manage trauma-related symptoms. Specific CBT modalities like cognitive processing therapy and prolonged exposure therapy are effective for trauma treatment.

Medications

Antidepressants, particularly selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) like fluoxetine (Prozac), paroxetine (Paxil) and sertraline (Zoloft), can alleviate various PTSD symptoms. These medications may complement therapy in managing emotional distress.

It is essential to explore different treatment modalities under the guidance of a healthcare professional to find the most effective approach for you. Additional interventions, including alternative medications and group therapy, may be recommended based on individual needs. Addressing co-occurring issues like substance misuse is also crucial for comprehensive treatment.

Remember, the goal of treatment is to empower individuals, improve emotional regulation, reduce symptoms and enhance overall wellbeing, enabling them to regain a sense of control and enjoyment in life.