

How to cope after a traumatic event

Traumatic events are often unexpected and impact people in different ways.

What is a traumatic event?

Traumatic experiences are often frightening and upsetting and can cause overwhelming stress. Examples of traumatic events include auto accidents, natural and man-made disasters, serious illness, violent assault and other crimes, terrorist attacks, and sudden loss of loved ones. A traumatic experience may be a one-time event, or prolonged and repeated over months or years. Child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, grinding poverty and deprivation, and military combat are examples of repeated trauma that can cause severe psychological effects.

What happens immediately after?

Traumatic experiences may cause a range of intense physical, emotional and psychological symptoms. People commonly feel shock and disbelief right after the traumatic event, and may have a hard time accepting the reality of what happened.

Emotional reactions

When the initial shock wears off, normal emotional reactions in the hours and days that follow may include:


- Anxiety and fear. These emotions may come in waves, at unpredictable times.
- Flashbacks and nightmares.
- Sadness and depression.
- Guilt, shame, or despair.
- Anger and irritability.
- Emotional numbness and feelings of disconnection from others.
- A sense of helplessness and vulnerability.
- A tendency to be “hyper-alert” and easily startled.
- Problems concentrating.
- Emotional outbursts.

Physical reactions

Physical reactions are a result of stress hormones flooding the nervous system. Common physical symptoms include:

- Difficulty falling or staying asleep.
- Fatigue.
- Headaches, stomachaches, or other bodily pain.
- Racing heart.
- Feeling dizzy or faint.
- Changes in appetite.

Generally, the unsettling thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions become less intense and less frequent in the days and weeks following the event.



The painful emotions following a traumatic event take time to process. The following tips will help you relieve traumatic stress reactions and begin healing.

What you can do

- Reach out to others for support. There may be times you don't want to talk about the traumatic event, but it's vital to stay connected with other people.
- Be prepared for and accept difficult emotions. Sometimes emotions may be triggered by reminders of the trauma and may be sudden or intense. These intense feelings will pass.
- Get back into your usual routine. While your appetite or sleeping habits may be off, try to eat healthy meals at regular times. Exercise and meditation can be very helpful for reducing stress.
- Take part in activities you enjoy.

What to avoid

- Blocking out emotions with alcohol or other drugs. This will just prolong the healing and potentially cause other problems.
- Major life changes. Give yourself time before making any big decisions.
- Cutting yourself off from other people. You don't need to go it alone.
- Watching too much media exposure of the event. Distressing images on the news or social media sites can be further traumatizing.

When to get help

If you continue to experience stress reactions for six weeks or more that interfere with your ability to live a normal life, you may need help from a mental health professional. While everyone is different and heals at their own pace, some people develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after a traumatic event.

Signs of PTSD include disturbing memories, nightmares or flashbacks, suicidal thoughts or feelings, disconnection from others, and trouble functioning at home and work. It's important to seek help if you think you might have symptoms of PTSD.

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