

Trauma

Overcoming the Impacts

Emotional and psychological trauma is the result of extraordinarily stressful events that shatter your sense of security and stability, causing you to feel helpless, ineffective and vulnerable in a seemingly hostile world. Traumatic experiences often involve a threat to life or safety, but *any situation that leaves you feeling overwhelmed and alone can be traumatic, even without physical harm*. It is not the details that determine whether an event is traumatic, but your *subjective emotional experience* of the event. The more frightened and helpless you feel, the more likely that you have been traumatised.

A stressful event may be traumatic if:

- It was unexpected
- You were unprepared
- You felt powerless to prevent it
- It happens repeatedly
- Someone was intentionally cruel
- It happened during childhood

Trauma can be caused by single one-off event, such as an accident, natural disaster, or violent assault. It can also arise from ongoing, unresolved stress, such as an abusive relationship, regular neighbourhood crime, or a life-threatening illness or condition.

Exposure to traumatic events can be experienced by:

- directly experiencing the traumatic event
- witnessing the event happening to someone else
- learning of the event happening to a family member or friend
- repeated or over- exposure to the aftermath of trauma

Not all potentially traumatic events lead to lasting emotional and psychological damage. Some people rebound quickly from tragic and shocking experiences whilst others are left devastated.

Risk factors

Some risk factors can increase vulnerability to emotional and psychological trauma. People are more likely to be traumatised by a stressful experience if already under a heavy stress load or have suffered a series of losses. Negative psychological and emotional effects can occur with media exposure of traumatic events. People who have already been traumatised are more vulnerable to new trauma – especially if the earlier trauma occurred during childhood.

Childhood trauma

Traumatic experiences during childhood can have severe, long-term effects. Traumatized children possess a limited sense of internal power while perceiving the world as a frightening, dangerous place. The learned helplessness and default 'freeze' response are a debilitating side effect of childhood trauma. When not resolved, this fundamental fear and helplessness carries on into adulthood, setting the stage for further trauma.

The quality of early relationships will affect the adult's ability to feel safe in the world, trust others, manage stress, and rebound from disappointment. Trauma in the present can bring back memories of early trauma.

Childhood trauma that disrupts the sense of safety and security, can include:

- Unstable or unsafe environment
- Separation from a parent
- Serious illness
- Intrusive medical procedures
- Sexual, physical, or verbal abuse
- Domestic violence
- Neglect
- Bullying

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Trauma

Symptoms of trauma

Following a traumatic event, people can experience a wide range of physical, emotional and psychological reactions. It may feel like you're going crazy, but remember — these are *normal* responses to *abnormal* experiences.

Emotional and psychological symptoms of trauma:

- Shock, denial, or disbelief
- Intense or persistent anger, irritability, mood swings
- Guilt, shame, self-blame
- Feeling sad or hopeless
- Panic reactions to sudden noises / smells
- Avoidance of reminders / location related to event
- Confusion, difficulty concentrating
- Anxiety and fear
- Withdrawal from others
- Feeling disconnected or numb
- Distorted thoughts on the causes / consequences of event
- Reliving the experience (i.e. flashbacks, nightmares)
- Crying

Physical symptoms of trauma:

- Sleep disturbances
- Easily startled
- Racing heartbeat
- Aches, pains and muscle tension
- Fatigue, lethargy
- Difficulty concentrating
- Edginess, agitation, feeling wound-up
- Uncontrollable crying

Symptoms can last a few days or a few months, gradually fading as you process the trauma. When you feel recovered, you may still be troubled sometimes by painful, emotional memories, especially in response to triggers such as the event anniversary, an image, sound, or a sense of *déjà vu*.

Whether or not a traumatic event involves death, *grief is normal* following a traumatising event -- survivors must cope with the loss of their sense of safety and security.

When to seek professional help

After a traumatic event, you may struggle with emotions, disturbing memories, or a sense of constant danger. You may feel numb, disconnected and unable to trust others. It can take time to manage the pain and feel safe again, though support from family and friends can aid recovery – everyone heals at their own pace. If, after several months, the symptoms aren't easing, consider seeking professional help.

Seek professional help when you are:

- Having trouble functioning
- Suffering from severe fear, anxiety, or depression
- Unable to maintain relationships
- Experiencing upsetting memories, nightmares, or flashbacks
- Avoiding things that remind you of the trauma
- Emotionally numb and disconnected
- Using alcohol or drugs to cope

To heal from trauma, you need to accept and address the feelings and memories you've avoided, or they may return, uninvited and uncontrollable. Giving up, denial or avoiding trauma-related conversation are related to a *poor recovery from trauma* (i.e. with ongoing symptoms such as depression, flashbacks, emotional numbing and relationship difficulties). Healthy recovery involves acknowledging that the event was terrible while not allowing it to interfere with daily life.

Healing involves:

- Processing trauma-related memories and feelings
- Discharging unreleased '*fight-or-flight*' energy
- Learning to control strong emotions
- Rebuilding the ability to trust others

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

There are a range of psychological treatments available to adults with PTSD, though two of the most effective treatments are Trauma-focused Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (TF-CBT) and Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR).

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Trauma recovery tips

It takes time to recover from trauma. Give yourself time to heal and mourn the losses you've experienced – you can't rush the process, so *be patient*. Difficult and volatile emotions may arise, but just allow yourself to feel them without judgment or guilt.

Staying grounded

If you're feeling disoriented, confused or upset, do your best to stay 'grounded'. The following trauma self-help exercise may help:

- Sit with a straight spine on a comfortable chair, place your feet flat on the floor, hands resting in your lap
- Observe six objects, of either red or blue, from your surroundings to bring your awareness into the present. Pay attention to the breath, letting it go deeper and calmer.
- If outdoors, find a peaceful place to rest, feeling your body being supported by the earth and focusing on the sounds of nature

Social and behavioural self-help strategies

- **Connect with others.**
Following a trauma, you may want to withdraw, but isolation can make symptoms worse. Social support is strongly connected to healthy recovery, so make an effort to maintain your relationships by turning to a trusted family member, friend, counsellor, or clergyman. Avoid spending too much time alone. There are specialised support groups if your social network is limited.
- **Daily routine.**
Establishing a structured schedule of activities after a trauma assists in grounding a person affected by trauma with allocated times for waking, sleeping, eating, working, exercise, relaxing and social activities.
- **Self-care.**
Reduce the effects of stress by getting plenty of rest, exercising regularly and eating a well-balanced diet. Alcohol and drug use can exacerbate trauma symptoms such as depression, anxiety, and isolation. Reduce feelings of agitation and irritability with regular relaxation exercises.

Resilience

A traumatic event can create a rupture in a person's life story with a brutal reminder on the brevity and preciousness of life. Resilience and recovery do not require extraordinary inner toughness, but rather depend on the personal choices of not allowing the experience to limit quality of life, accepting and adapting to change, meeting problems head on and taking *good care* of yourself.