

TRAUMA: What to Expect



What is a traumatic event?

Most everyone has been through a stressful event in his or her life. When the event, or series of events, causes a lot of stress, it is called a traumatic event. Traumatic events are marked by a sense of horror, helplessness, serious injury, or the threat of serious injury or death. Traumatic events affect survivors, rescue workers, and the friends and relatives of victims who have been involved.

What Are Some Common Responses?

Your response to a traumatic event may vary. Responses include:

- Feelings become intense and sometimes are unpredictable. You may become more irritable than usual, and your mood may change back and forth dramatically.
- You might be especially anxious or nervous, or even become depressed.
- Thoughts and behaviour patterns are affected by trauma. You might have repeated and vivid memories of the event. These flashbacks may occur for no apparent reason and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating.
- You may find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions, or become more easily confused.
- Sleep and eating patterns also may be disrupted.
- Recurring emotional reactions are common. These triggers may be accompanied by fears that the stressful event will be repeated.
- Interpersonal relationships often become strained. Greater conflict, such as more frequent arguments with family members and coworkers, is common. On the other hand, you might become withdrawn and isolated and avoid your usual activities.
- Physical symptoms may accompany the extreme stress.

For example, headaches, nausea and chest pain may result and may require medical attention. Pre-existing medical conditions may worsen due to the stress.

Responses to trauma can last for weeks to months before you start to feel normal again. Most people report feeling better within three months after a traumatic event. If the problems become worse or last longer than one month after the event, you may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

What Can You Do for Yourself?

There are many things you can do to cope with traumatic events.

- Understand that your symptoms may be normal, especially right after the trauma.
- Keep to your usual routine.
- Take the time to continue to resolve day-to-day conflicts so they do not add to your stress.
- Do not shy away from situations, people and places that remind you of the trauma.
- Find ways to relax and be kind to yourself.
- Turn to family, friends, or a clergy person for support, and talk about your experiences and feelings with them.
- Participate in leisure and recreational activities.
- Recognize that you cannot control everything.
- Recognize the need for trained help, and call your Employee Assistance Program or a local mental health centre.

How do people respond differently over time?

It is important for you to realize that there is not one standard pattern of reaction to the extreme stress of traumatic experiences. Some people respond

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immediately, while others have delayed reactions – sometimes months or even years later. Some have adverse effects for a long period of time, while others recover rather quickly.

Reactions can change over time. Some who have suffered from trauma are energized initially by the event to help them with the challenge of coping, only to later become discouraged or depressed.

A number of factors tend to affect the length of time required for recovery, including:

- The degree of intensity and loss. Events that last longer and pose a greater threat, and where loss of life or substantial loss of property is involved, often take longer to resolve.
- A person's general ability to cope with emotionally challenging situations. Individuals who have handled other difficult, stressful circumstances well may find it easier to cope with the traumas.
- Other stressful events preceding the traumatic experience. Individuals faced with other emotionally challenging situations, such as serious health problems or family-related difficulties, may have more intense reactions to the new stressful event and need more time to recover.

How should I help myself?

There are a number of steps you can take to help restore emotional well-being and a sense of control following an abnormal event or other traumatic experience, including the following:

- Give yourself time to heal. Anticipate that this will be a difficult time in your life. Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have experienced. Try to be patient with changes in your emotional state.
- Ask for support from people who care about you and will listen and empathize with your situation. But keep in mind that your typical support system may be weakened if those who are close to you also have experienced or witnessed the trauma.
- Communicate your experience in whatever ways feel comfortable to you such as by talking with family or close friends, or keeping a journal.

- Find out about local support groups that often are available. These can be especially helpful for people with limited personal support systems.
- Try to find groups led by appropriately trained and experienced professionals. Group discussion can help people realize that other individuals in the same circumstances often have similar reactions and emotions.
- Engage in healthy behaviours to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience ongoing difficulties with sleep, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Establish or reestablish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. Take some time off from the demands of daily life by pursuing hobbies or other enjoyable activities.
- Avoid major life decisions such as switching careers or jobs if possible because these activities tend to be highly stressful.
- Become knowledgeable about what to expect as a result of trauma.

When should I seek professional help?

Some people are able to cope effectively with the emotional and physical demands brought about by a natural disaster or other traumatic experience by using their own support systems. It is not unusual, however, to find that serious problems persist and continue to interfere with daily living. For example, some may feel overwhelming nervousness or lingering sadness that adversely affects job performance and interpersonal relationships. Individuals with prolonged reactions that disrupt their daily functioning should consult with a trained and experienced mental health professional. Psychologists and other appropriate mental health providers help educate people about normal responses to extreme stress. These professionals work with individuals affected by trauma to help them find constructive ways of dealing with the emotional impact.

Contact your Employee Assistance Program for further support

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