

# Coping with a Traumatic Event

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## 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. They may also have an impact on people who have seen the event either firsthand or on television.

## What Are Some Common Responses?

A person's response to a traumatic event may vary. Responses include feelings of fear, grief, and depression. Physical and behavioral responses include nausea, dizziness, changes in appetite and sleep pattern, and withdrawal from daily activities. Responses to trauma can last for weeks to months before people 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, the person may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

## What Is PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an intense physical and emotional response to thoughts and reminders of the event that last for many weeks or months after the traumatic event. The symptoms of PTSD fall into three broad types: re-living, avoidance, and increased arousal.

- **Symptoms of re-living** include flashbacks, nightmares, and extreme emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the event. Emotional reactions can include feeling guilty, extreme fear of harm, and numbing of emotions. Physical reactions can include uncontrollable shaking, chills or heart palpitations, and tension headaches.
- **Symptoms of avoidance** include staying away from activities, places, thoughts, or feelings related to the trauma or feeling detached or estranged from others.
- **Symptoms of increased arousal** include being overly alert or easily startled, difficulty sleeping, irritability or outbursts of anger, and lack of concentration.

Other symptoms linked with PTSD include: panic attacks, depression, suicidal thoughts and feelings, drug abuse, feelings of being estranged and isolated, and not being able to complete daily tasks.

## 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.

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- Keep to your usual routine.
- Take the time 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, and clergy 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 a local mental health center.

### **What Can You Do for Your Child?**

Children may struggle with a traumatic event in ways very similar to adults. Knowing what you can do to help a child recover is important when helping him/her rediscover a sense of normalcy. Try these steps:

- Let your child know that it is okay to feel upset when something bad or scary happens.
- Encourage your child to express feelings and thoughts without making judgments.
- Return to daily routines.

### **When Should You Contact Your Doctor or Mental Health Professional?**

About half of those with PTSD recover within three months without treatment. Sometimes symptoms do not go away on their own or they last for more than three months. This may happen because of the severity of the event, direct exposure to the traumatic event, seriousness of the threat to life, the number of times an event happened, a history of past trauma, and psychological problems before the event.

You may need to consider seeking professional help if your symptoms affect your relationship with your family and friends, or affect your job. If you suspect that you or someone you know has PTSD, talk with a health care provider or call your local mental health clinic.

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