

Building resilience to cope with trauma

Emotional and psychological trauma can come in many forms. It can result from experiencing one-time events, such as a serious accident, injury, attack, etc., or persistent circumstances in a person's life that make them feel threatened, unsafe, overwhelmed and/or isolated. It can result from childhood experiences, such as neglect, or sexual, physical or verbal abuse, or living in an unstable environment. It can result from tragic events, such as the sudden death of a loved one.

Traumatic events can affect an individual or entire groups. For people of colour, the many overt and subtle forms of racism they endure continuously are traumatic, and can manifest in race-based traumatic stress with symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder that threaten their health and wellbeing.

Whatever the specific event or situation is, the more deeply distressed or disturbed you feel, the more likely it is to cause trauma.

Many people who've experienced trauma go through a period of unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, severe anxiety, uncontrollable thoughts about the event and physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. (Note: If these symptoms grow worse, last for months or years, and interfere with your ability to function day to day, then you may have post-traumatic stress disorder. Talk to a doctor or mental health professional for help).

While trauma affects everyone differently, building resilience can help make it easier to adjust and function in the short term and throughout life.



Manage the triggers you can

For someone who has experienced trauma, it can be difficult to get through a day without something — a smell, a sound, a voice, an image — triggering a flashback. In those moments, the person feels the emotional and physical distress they felt during the traumatic event. By understanding what you're going through, you can better manage and control potential triggers.

For example, Olympic gold medal gymnast Aly Raisman is a survivor of sexual abuse and a spokesperson for Fight Child Abuse. In interviews, she talks openly about learning to limit her exposure to triggers, such as when people stop to tell her how much they admire her strength and advocacy and then begin to share their own stories of sexual abuse. While she wants to support them, she also knows hearing the details of their abuse will trigger flashbacks of her own experiences, so she asks them not to share specifics with her.

Another common response to trauma is dwelling on negative thoughts or having recurring thoughts of the experience. In these cases, you might feel yourself getting increasingly emotional, such as by feeling anxious, nervous, angry, sad, stressed or another strong emotion.

Here it can be helpful to identify that you are ruminating, and remind yourself that while thoughts can come at will, you can take back the power by taking measures to manage them. Try to think about

what is happening and why, which will help shift your focus and stop the cycle. Take some deep breaths to calm yourself, then refocus on what is happening in the present moment and redirect. Take a mental scan of your body. For example, if you notice your neck and shoulders have tensed up, slowly roll your shoulders and gently tip your head from side to side to relieve the tension.

If you feel a surge of nervous energy, for example, elevated mood, quickened heart rate, etc., consider going for a brisk walk or practising yoga or meditating to release it. It can be helpful to use a self-help app to help guide you through tough times.

The goal is to find a way to calm yourself and take back control of your emotions. While you cannot control whether a thought comes into your head, you can manage how you react to your thoughts and the emotions they conjure.

Control what you can

Beyond finding ways to help yourself in the moment, you can also work to build your overall resilience to help you get through today — and whatever tomorrow brings. To do this, psychologists generally point to 4 key components — connection, wellness, purpose and healthy thinking — to nurture resilience.

- **Connection** – Sometimes experiencing trauma makes people want to isolate themselves and retract. But it's important to remember you are not alone and to stay connected to people who care for you. Let compassionate loved ones provide you with emotional support. Also, consider joining a support group for trauma survivors to help you on your recovery journey.
- **Wellness** – Practising self-care will help you be and feel stronger physically, mentally and emotionally. Promoting health and wellness can be as simple as exercising regularly, getting enough sleep, eating a well-balanced diet and taking time to do things you enjoy. Also, limit your exposure to triggers you have identified.
- **Purpose** – Helping others can help you feel empowered and bolster your sense of purpose. Consider ways to foster your sense of purpose, such as by volunteering for an organisation you care about or helping a friend with a project. Empower yourself by developing realistic goals and taking steps to accomplish them. Also, nurture a positive self-image by thinking about challenges you've overcome and accomplishments you've achieved.
- **Healthy thinking** – Do your best to keep things in perspective. Identify and accept what you can and cannot control. Control the things you can, and do your best to let go of the others. As new challenges arise, put them in a broader context by looking at the long view and remembering how you've faced and overcome other challenges. Remember the good things in your life, and expect more good things to happen. This helps maintain a hopeful outlook, which can help you feel happier, more productive and more resilient.

Get professional help

These are just a few actions to consider taking to nurture your mental health and wellness and build resilience. A professional mental health expert can help you develop a recovery strategy tailored to your unique needs and situation.



Critical support when you need it

Visit optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter for additional critical support resources and information.

Sources

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