

## Coping with trauma

There is no easy way to talk about war or what it does to the people who endure or observe it. War is traumatic – emotionally and psychologically, and can expose people to many different terrifying, shocking and disturbing events. Whatever the specific event or situation is, the more deeply distressed or disturbed a person feels, 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 such as fatigue, headaches or nausea. For many people, these symptoms will begin to lessen over time. However for others they will endure, making it difficult to function in daily life.

Amongst people who have experienced war or other conflict in the previous 10 years, an estimated 22% will have depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia; and 5% will have a severe form of these mental health disorders.<sup>1</sup> Trauma also increases the risk of chronic diseases (e.g. heart disease, diabetes and cancer) and social problems (e.g. poverty, crime and violence).<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, along with these increased risks comes the difficult reality that access to quality, affordable care is often limited in humanitarian and conflict settings.<sup>3</sup>

With this in mind, this article offers guidance on how trauma manifests, as well as some self-care approaches to ease the symptoms. Whilst trauma affects everyone differently, building resilience can help make it easier to adjust and function in the short term and throughout life.

### Managing triggers

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 might feel the emotional and physical distress they felt during the traumatic event(s). By understanding what they're going through, they can learn to better manage and control potential triggers.

For example, they can come to realise that watching news footage of an ongoing war or hearing details of the abuse another person has suffered could trigger flashbacks of their own experiences, so the person may decide to limit exposure to the news and ask other survivors not to share details of their own experiences with them.

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

Here it can be helpful for the person to identify that they are ruminating, and remind themselves that while thoughts can come at will, they can take back the power by taking measures to manage these thoughts. For example, purposely thinking about what is happening and why can help shift their focus and stop the cycle. It can also help to take some deep breaths to calm themselves down and then refocus on what is happening in the present and redirect. Taking a mental scan of their body can also help them stop the thought pattern and focus on the present. For example, if they notice their neck and shoulders have tensed up, they can slowly roll their shoulders and gently tip their head from side to side to relieve the tension.

If they feel a surge of nervous energy, e.g. elevated mood, accelerated heart rate, etc., going for a brisk walk or practising yoga or meditating may help release it.

The goal is to find a way to calm themselves and take back control of their emotions. Whilst they cannot control whether a thought comes into their head, they can try to manage how they react to the painful thoughts and emotions that occur.

## Taking control

Beyond finding ways to help themselves in the moment, the individual can work to build their overall resilience to help them get through today – and whatever tomorrow brings. To do this, psychologists generally point to four key components – connection, wellness, purpose and healthy thinking – to nurture resilience.

- **Connection.** Sometimes experiencing trauma makes people want to isolate themselves and withdraw. But the person should remind themselves that experiencing trauma and having a mental health condition are not signs of weakness or rare occurrences, and they do not have to go through it alone. It's important to stay connected to other people and accept support, including from those who may be trying to help them from outside of their inner circle. It can also be helpful to join a support group, such as for trauma survivors, for help along their recovery journey.
- **Wellness.** Practising self-care can help people be and feel stronger physically, mentally and emotionally. Understanding that each person's situation and circumstances differ, especially during times of insecurity and uncertainty, the individual should do their best to take care of their overall health and well-being, including by limiting exposure to triggers and avoiding the use of alcohol, drugs and tobacco as coping mechanisms.
- **Purpose.** Helping others can help people feel empowered and strengthen their sense of purpose – and hope. Depending on the situation, the person can consider ways to do this, such as by helping a friend in need, volunteering for a humanitarian organisation or helping other survivors or their host families with daily tasks and chores. Also, they can nurture a positive self-image by thinking about challenges they've overcome and accomplishments they've achieved in life.
- **Healthy thinking.** In especially trying times, many people benefit from identifying and learning to accept what is and what's not within their control. As new challenges arise, the individual should do their best to put these into a broader context by looking at the long view, and remembering past challenges they've faced and overcome. This helps provide perspective and can serve as a positive touchstone that, despite the current circumstances, challenges can be overcome and their life can feel good again. This can help restore hope in the individual, which in turn bolsters resilience.

Whilst many of the factors that cause PTSD are not under an individual's control, getting effective treatment after PTSD symptoms develop can be critical to reduce symptoms and improve their day-to-day functioning. If the symptoms endure for more than a month and/or worsen, the individual should consult a medical or mental health care professional, or contact a support group or organisation, that can connect them to mental health services.

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2. World Health Organization, "Injuries and violence." <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/injuries-and-violence>. Accessed 22 April 2022.
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