

Coping with trauma

At a glance

- Trauma is a sudden event that impacts our ordinary life.
- You may experience feelings of helplessness, sadness, anger or guilt, as well as physical symptoms such as headaches or loss of appetite.
- Good self-care and getting support from others will help you to cope with trauma.

What to expect

Trauma is a sudden event that dramatically impacts our ordinary life, and changes the way we see the world. This might include the illness of a close family member, a car accident, an assault or other threatening events. It is normal to feel shocked and somewhat distressed following any event that is not in the 'normal' range of human experience. Remember, it is the situation or circumstances that are "abnormal," not you.

Emotional reactions to trauma

Typically, you may experience the following feelings and symptoms after such an event:

- **Helplessness:** you may feel you are no longer in control of your life or your feelings. You may experience repeated memories of the event and feel that you cannot control your thoughts.
- **Sadness:** you may frequently feel like bursting into tears.
- **Anger:** you may experience anger at what has happened, and at whatever caused it or allowed it to happen. This may be tied in with a sense of injustice, or a sense that others do not properly understand.
- **Guilt:** you may experience guilt as a result of things that you did or did not do, or through feeling better off than those who were more personally involved in the incident.

Physical reactions to trauma

After the event, you may experience the following physical reactions:

- Constant tension, headaches and muscle pain
- Restlessness
- Poor concentration; for example, making more mistakes, taking longer to do everyday tasks or more frequent daydreaming
- Feeling “foggy” and numb
- Sleeplessness — you may notice changes in the pattern of your normal sleep routine; for example, difficulty in getting to sleep, early morning waking or nightmares
- Flashbacks to the incident, which can be triggered by smells and noises
- Excessive jumpiness, including sensitivity to loud noises or sudden movements, particularly if they remind you of the incident itself
- Loss of appetite

Behavioral reactions to trauma

You might also notice changes in behavior such as the following:

- Fear of returning to the area where the traumatic event took place
- A desire to isolate yourself and avoid talking to other people
- Feeling sensitive to reminders of the incident and avoiding media coverage or other things which make you think of the incident
- Loss of interest in things you previously enjoyed doing, or in socializing
- A change in libido
- A loss of interest in your daily routine
- Reduced confidence in yourself and belief in your ability to cope
- Increased levels of irritability
- A tendency to drink more alcohol

What can you do?

- Remind yourself that, after any traumatic event, it is normal to feel the way you do.
- Talk about the incident to other people who were involved and who have shared similar experiences.
- Talk over the facts and emotions concerning the incident with close friends and relatives.
- Be aware not to use excessive alcohol to cope — this can easily get out of control.
- Be aware of over-activity as sometimes it can be detrimental when it diverts attention from the help you need for yourself.
- Be aware that sometimes it helps to talk to someone outside the family who knows how to help in crisis situations; for example, your GP, a member of your church or faith community or a local Victim Support Scheme.

If after a month or longer your reactions are getting worse rather than improving, you may need to seek assistance. For example:

- If you are feeling that you cannot experience happiness, joy or love and other positive emotions.
- If you are taking less interest in things you used to enjoy.
- If you are having difficulty imagining the future.
- If you continue to avoid places and people that remind you of the incident.
- You continue to have nightmares, poor sleep and/or other forms of stress and anxiety.
If your relationships seem to be suffering badly, or sexual problems develop.
- If you continue to smoke or drink to excess following the event.
- If your work performance suffers.
- If, as a helper, you are suffering “exhaustion.”

Some symptoms may not seem so important, but may well be related. For example:

- If you find yourself getting more angry or having outbursts and you do not normally do this.
- If you find you cannot concentrate so well and have to work harder to get things done.
- If you find you are becoming forgetful and absent minded.
- If you are experiencing unaccustomed physical pains, aches or clumsiness.
- If you find it harder and harder to be with people and want to stay in places that feel “safe.”
- If, after the event, you find you lack confidence or self-esteem.



General advice

- Focus on your need for rest and relaxation — soothing activities allow both mental and physical recovery.
- Stay in contact with those closest to you. Contact can help you avoid the loneliness many people experience after trauma.
- Try to get back to a normal routine as much as possible.
- Try not to avoid the memories completely, complete avoidance of the experience and the memories may harm the process of recovery.
- Share your feelings with others.
- Be careful doing things which involve concentration, such as driving and household tasks.
- Remember this is a passing phase; with time, the majority of people make a full recovery.

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms seek advice from your GP or from this scheme.



Critical support when you need it

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



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