

Understanding trauma — and how to heal



Natural disasters, political instability, police shootings, a pandemic ... There's a lot happening in the world, and events like these can lead to trauma. Whether you've been directly affected by a stressful event, watched one from afar or witnessed a loved one being affected, it may "shatter your sense of security, making you feel helpless in a dangerous world."¹ You might feel a sense of horror or like you're at risk.² Or you might feel numb, disconnected and unable to trust others.¹ Better understanding what trauma is — and how to lessen its effect on your life — may help you find a path forward.

What is trauma?

Trauma is a human reaction to a stressful event. It can range from something that happened to just you to something your entire community has experienced. It can even be due to a global situation such as a pandemic.³

What are the symptoms of trauma?

Some people may experience an immediate reaction to a traumatic event. Others may not react until later.⁴ Unfortunately, those who don't react until later may be thought of as being cold or uncaring.

Symptoms can include:²

- Feelings of fear, grief and depression
- Nausea or dizziness
- Changes in appetite or sleep
- Withdrawal from everyday activities

These symptoms may increase when something reminds you of the event. For example, fireworks or the sound of a car backfiring can be triggering for people who have experienced a war zone. Or a simple smell or taste can remind you of the moment when you first heard about or experienced something traumatic. Symptoms may also arise on the anniversary of an event.

Tips for managing trauma

If you're experiencing trauma, it's important to know that your feelings are valid. Even if you weren't directly involved in the event, you may have a strong response.¹ Also, you may be having different reactions than others who experienced it. Or you may even know people who seem not to be affected at all. It's OK that you're having these feelings, and there are things you can do to care for yourself during this time.

Don't isolate yourself. While you may not feel like being around others right now, isolating yourself isn't a healthy way to cope and can prolong your stress.⁵ Ask friends and family to support you. You might want to talk or have them take care of some everyday stressors for you such as errands or household tasks.⁵ But be honest if you don't want to talk about something too. Sometimes certain friends and family members, even if they're well intentioned, can say things that make you feel worse. And sometimes you just want to do "normal" social things without talking about serious topics.¹

Look to in-person or online groups for support too. Online groups are an especially good option during a time like a pandemic when gathering in person may not be safe. Connecting with others who are also experiencing trauma can be healing. Accept your feelings for what they are, expect they may change over time and don't compare yourself to others.¹

Take care of yourself — physically and emotionally. Avoid alcohol and drugs, which can suppress your feelings instead of letting you deal with them in a healthy way.⁴ Be sure to get plenty of quality sleep, as not getting enough can make symptoms worse.¹ Get some exercise even if light walking outdoors, and explore ways to calm your mind such as meditation, focused breathing, art or music.^{1,5}

Stay informed — within reason. If an event or its results are ongoing, you might feel stressed or nervous if you don't have the latest updates. Find a trustworthy news source. And be aware that rumors often circulate during a crisis — especially on social media. Avoid being tied to the news too much, though. Repeatedly hearing about or seeing images of something traumatic can be upsetting.⁶

Seek help if needed. Most people say they feel better within three months of a traumatic event. If you have symptoms that worsen or last longer than a month, you could be experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).² For some, they may not react to the trauma but can experience PTSD up to a year after the event. If your symptoms last, consider seeing a therapist. Seek help too if they're severe enough in the first month or if they occur later and significantly affect your relationships or work.² Your Employee Assistance Program can help you get connected.

Reclaim your power. When stressful events happen, many people are left feeling helpless. Look for ways that you can make an impact¹ such as volunteering, raising funds for people affected by the situation or advocating for political change. Check to be sure whatever cause you are fundraising for is legitimate as a lot of scams come out during traumatic times.

As you work through trauma, know that healing can take time. Eventually, your symptoms should start to improve, and you'll likely find yourself thinking about the event less and less. But if they don't get better soon enough or your work or home life is being impacted, help is available. Reach out.

1. HelpGuide. Emotional and Psychological Trauma. February 2020. Available at: <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/coping-with-emotional-and-psychological-trauma.htm>. Accessed March 3, 2021.

2. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Coping with a Traumatic Event. Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/masstrauma/factsheets/public/coping.pdf>. Accessed March 3, 2021.

3. Xiao S, Luo D, Xiao Y. Survivors of COVID-19 are at high risk of posttraumatic stress disorder. *Glob Health Res Policy* 5, 29 (2020). Available at: <https://ghrp.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s41256-020-00155-2>. Accessed March 3, 2021.

4. CDC. Coping with Traumatic Events. Updated February 25, 2019. Available at: <https://tools.cdc.gov/medialibrary/index.aspx#/media/id/302245>. Accessed March 3, 2021.

5. American Psychological Association. How to Cope with Traumatic Stress. October 30, 2019. Available at: <https://www.apa.org/topics/traumatic-stress>. Accessed March 3, 2021.

6. CDC. Taking Care of Your Emotional Health. September 13, 2019. Available at: <https://emergency.cdc.gov/coping/selfcare.asp>. Accessed March 3, 2021.

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