

Coping After Trauma

After a traumatic event people experience a range of physical, mental and emotional symptoms. This guide will help you understand post-trauma reactions and provides strategies to help you cope and recover.

What is Trauma?

Most people will go through difficult or stressful life circumstances. In most instances these are not traumatic. Trauma events are unusual and extreme, involving loss (or threat of loss) of life, limb or integrity. A person who is immediately involved in a traumatic event may experience post-trauma reactions, as well as bystanders, witnesses, or even people who have heard graphic details or depictions after the fact. Some examples of trauma may include: child abuse, domestic violence, disasters, accidents or crashes, gruesome medical emergencies, sexual assault, violence, and other graphic occurrences. Though some life circumstances might be terrible (divorce, stitches in your knee, etc.) not everything rises to the level of a traumatic event.

What are normal post-trauma reactions?

Everyone responds differently after a traumatic event. Some people may not be bothered much at all, while others may have extreme reactions and symptoms. Some people describe trauma reactions as our body's normal response to abnormal situations. Symptoms can be broken down into a few categories:

Physical: After a traumatic event many people find they can't eat or sleep. This is completely normal. In response to the extreme circumstances, your body releases "fight or flight" chemicals that shut down your digestive and immune systems, and focus only on survival. You may feel jittery, keyed up, on edge, or irritable and find it difficult to relax. These feelings may last days or weeks, but should gradually reduce over time. After a few days or weeks you might feel tired, fatigued or even exhausted. Some people describe wanting to crawl into bed and never come out. This, too, is normal, and it is completely fine to give your body a few days of rest. If, however, after several days you still lack energy and want to sleep all the time you may be experiencing beginning stages of depression and should consider seeking professional help.

Cognitive: Traumatic events become seared into our brains more intensely than normal, run-of-the-mill events. During the event your emotional centers are picking up information that may later be recalled through flashbacks, dreams or triggers. These memories may not seem complete or even make much sense. For example, you may envision a flash of bright red that makes your heart race and palms sweat. Maybe it's the smell of burning rubber, or the sound of shattering glass that makes you tense and nervous. You may intensely remember some details, but have difficulty remembering other things. These are all very normal reactions. Over time, however, the flashbacks and triggers should decrease, and your ability to concentrate and focus on daily tasks should improve.

Emotional: Trauma events can be terrifying. It's no wonder that many people feel rattled and unstable in the days and weeks following a traumatic event. People tend to feel vulnerable and want to draw closer to family and friends. Some people get a new perspective on life; others become angry and experience a crisis of faith. There is no right or wrong way to feel after experiencing trauma, but if the negative, destructive or angry thoughts and feelings persist longer than a few days or weeks, you may want to consider talking to a professional who can help you heal and cope.

How can I recover?

Most people find that recovery from trauma happens naturally over time. It is always important to engage in self-care, but after surviving a traumatic event it is especially important. Here are some things you can do to foster resilience in yourself:

- Avoid TV, news, articles, music, movies or video games that depict violence or danger.
- Eat a healthy diet high in vitamins and nutrients. Drink plenty of water.
- Get a little exercise every day. You may not feel up to running a marathon, but a walk around the block could really help.
- Get plenty of rest. Even if you can't sleep, there is value in rest.
- Pay attention to how you are doing. Don't push yourself too hard. Give yourself permission to slow down and heal.
- Find ways to discuss and express your thoughts, feelings and emotions—by yourself and with others.
- Find support in family, friends, faith communities, and support groups.
- Practice mindfulness, meditation, or relaxation exercises regularly.
- Never underestimate the power of a deep breath. Deep breathing is a powerful tool that is always available to you.
- Look for silver linings. People grow through difficult trials and tribulations. Consider how the traumatic event has impacted you and how your resilience and character have grown as a result (this may take weeks, months or even years to determine).

Where can I go for additional help?

There are many mental health professionals who specialize in helping people heal from trauma. A good place to start is with a counselor from your EAP. They can meet with you and assess your level of need. The counselor will provide you with strategies to cope and can help you process your thoughts and feelings, or refer you to a provider who specializes in trauma therapy. There's no problem too big or too small for EAP. If you are thinking that maybe you should talk to someone, you probably should. Call today! We're here for you.

Ascension WI EAP

(800).540.3758

EAP@ascension.org

www.ascensionWIEAP.org
