

This information is provided by National Center for Disease Control and Prevention

Coping With a Traumatic Event

What Is a Traumatic Event?

Most everyone has been through a stressful event in his or her life. When the event, or series of events, causes a lot of stress, it is called a traumatic event. Traumatic events are marked by a sense of horror, helplessness, serious injury, or the threat of serious injury or death. Traumatic events affect survivors, rescue workers, and the friends and relatives of victims who have been involved. Traumatic events may also have an impact on people who have seen the event either firsthand or on television.

What Are Some Common Responses?

A person's response to a traumatic event may vary. Responses include feelings of fear, grief, and depression. Physical and behavioral responses include nausea, dizziness, and changes in appetite and sleep pattern as well as withdrawal from daily activities. Responses to trauma can last for weeks to months before people start to feel normal again. Most people report feeling better within three months after a traumatic event. If the problems become worse or last longer than one month after the event, the person may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

What Is PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an intense physical and emotional response to thoughts and reminders of the event that last for many weeks or months after the traumatic event. The symptoms of PTSD fall into three broad types: re-living, avoidance and increased arousal.

- **Symptoms of re-living** include flashbacks, nightmares, and extreme emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the event. Emotional reactions can include feeling guilty, extreme fear of harm, and numbing of emotions. Physical reactions can include uncontrollable shaking, chills or heart palpitations, and tension headaches.
- **Symptoms of avoidance** include staying away from activities, places, thoughts, or feelings related to the trauma or feeling detached or estranged from others.
- **Symptoms of increased arousal** include being overly alert or easily startled, difficulty sleeping, irritability or outbursts of anger, and lack of concentration. Other symptoms linked with PTSD include: panic attacks, depression, suicidal thought and feelings, drug abuse, feelings of being estranged and isolated, and not being able to complete daily tasks.

What Can You Do for Yourself?

- Keep to your usual routine.
- Eat healthy meals. Be careful not to skip meals or to overeat.
- Exercise and stay active.
- Help other people in your community as a volunteer. Stay busy.
- Limit your time around the sights and sounds of what happened. Don't dwell on TV, radio, or newspaper reports on the tragedy.
- Take the time to resolve day-to-day conflicts so they do not add to your stress.
- Find ways to relax and be kind to yourself. Participate in leisure and recreational activities.
- Turn to family, friends, and clergy for support. Talk about your experiences and feelings.
- Recognize that you cannot control everything.

What Can You Do for Your Child?

- Let your child know that it is okay to feel upset when something bad or scary happens
- Encourage your child to express feelings and thoughts, without making judgments
- Return to daily routines

When Should You Contact Your Doctor or Mental Health Professional?

About half of those with PTSD recover within three months without treatment. Sometimes symptoms do not go away on their own, or they last for more than three months. This may happen because of the severity of the event, direct exposure to the traumatic event, seriousness of the threat to life, the number of times an event happened, a history of past trauma, and psychological problems before the event.

You may need to consider seeking professional help if your symptoms are severe enough during the first month to interfere a lot with your family, friends, and job. If you suspect that you or someone you know has PTSD talk with a health care provider or call your local mental health clinic.

Remember:

A traumatic event can turn your world upside down. After surviving a disaster or act of violence, people may feel dazed or even numb. They may also feel sad, helpless, or anxious. In spite of the tragedy, some people just feel happy to be alive. It is not unusual to have bad memories or dreams. You may avoid places or people that remind you of the disaster. You might have trouble sleeping, eating, or paying attention. Many people have short tempers and get angry easily. These are all normal reactions to stress.

It will take time before you start to feel better. You may have strong feelings right away. Or you may not notice a change until much later, after the crisis is over. Stress can change how you act with your friends and family. It will take time for you to feel better and for your life to return to normal. Give yourself time to heal.

Sometimes the stress can be too much to handle alone. Ask for help if you:

- Are not able to take care of yourself or your children.
- Are not able to do your job.
- Use alcohol or drugs to get away from your problems.
- Feel sad or depressed for more than two weeks
- Think about suicide.

If you or someone you know is having trouble dealing with the tragedy, ask for help. Talk to a counselor, your doctor, or community organization, such as:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

For more information check out:

The National Center for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov

1-800-232-4636