



Emotional and Psychological Trauma

Healing from Trauma and Moving On



If you've experienced an extremely stressful or disturbing event that's left you feeling helpless and emotionally out of control, you may have been traumatized. Psychological trauma can leave you struggling with upsetting emotions, memories, and anxiety that won't go away. It can also leave you feeling numb, disconnected, and unable to trust other people. When bad things happen, it can take a while to get over the pain and feel safe again. But with these self-help strategies and support, you can speed your recovery. Whether the trauma happened years ago or yesterday, you can make healing changes and move on with your life.

What is emotional and psychological trauma?

Emotional and psychological trauma is the result of extraordinarily stressful events that shatter your sense of security, making you feel helpless in a dangerous world. Traumatic experiences often involve a threat to life or safety, but any situation that leaves you feeling overwhelmed and isolated can be traumatic, even if it doesn't involve physical harm. It's not the objective facts that determine whether an event is traumatic, but your subjective emotional experience of the event. The more frightened and helpless you feel, the more likely you are to be traumatized.

Emotional and psychological trauma can be caused by:

One-time events, such as an accident, injury, natural disaster, or violent attack

Ongoing, relentless stress, such as living in a crime-ridden neighborhood or battling a life-threatening illness

Commonly overlooked causes, such as surgery (especially in the first 3 years of life), the sudden death of someone close, the breakup of a significant relationship, or a humiliating or deeply disappointing experience

An event can lead to trauma if:

- ▶ It happened unexpectedly.
- ▶ You were unprepared for it.
- ▶ You felt powerless to prevent it.

- ▶ It happened repeatedly.
- ▶ Someone was intentionally cruel.
- ▶ It happened in childhood

Risk factors

While traumatic events can happen to anyone, there are risk factors that make some of us more likely to experience psychological trauma following a disturbing event. You're more likely to be traumatized if you're already under a heavy stress load, have recently suffered a series of losses, or have been traumatized before—especially if the earlier trauma occurred in childhood.

Childhood trauma increases the risk of future trauma

Experiencing trauma in childhood can have a severe and long-lasting effect. When childhood trauma is not resolved, a sense of fear and helplessness carries over into adulthood, setting the stage for further trauma.

Childhood trauma can result from anything that disrupts a child's sense of safety, including:

- ▶ An unstable or unsafe environment
- ▶ Separation from a parent
- ▶ Serious illness
- ▶ Intrusive medical procedures

- ▶ [Sexual, physical, or verbal abuse](/articles/abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect.htm) (/articles/abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect.htm)
- ▶ Domestic violence
- ▶ Neglect

Symptoms

We all react in different ways to trauma, experiencing a wide range of physical and emotional reactions. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to think, feel, or respond, so don’t judge your own reactions or those of other people. **Your responses are NORMAL reactions to ABNORMAL events.**

Emotional & psychological symptoms:

- Shock, denial, or disbelief
- Confusion, difficulty concentrating
- Anger, irritability, mood swings
- Anxiety and fear
- Guilt, shame, self-blame
- Withdrawing from others
- Feeling sad or hopeless
- Feeling disconnected or numb

Physical symptoms:

- Insomnia or nightmares
- Fatigue
- Being startled easily

- Difficulty concentrating
- Racing heartbeat
- Edginess and agitation
- Aches and pains
- Muscle tension

Trauma symptoms typically last from a few days to a few months, gradually fading as you process the unsettling event. But even when you're feeling better, you may be troubled from time to time by painful memories or emotions—especially in response to triggers such as an anniversary of the event or something that reminds you of the trauma.

Grieving is normal following trauma

Whether or not a traumatic event involves death, survivors must cope with the loss, at least temporarily, of their sense of safety. The natural reaction to this loss is grief. Like people who have lost a loved one, trauma survivors go through a [grieving process](/articles/grief/coping-with-grief-and-loss.htm) (/articles/grief/coping-with-grief-and-loss.htm). You'll find this easier to cope with if you turn to others for support and take care of yourself.

Trauma recovery tip 1: Get moving

Trauma disrupts your body's natural equilibrium, freezing you in a state of hyperarousal and fear. In essence, your nervous system gets “stuck.” As well as burning off adrenaline and releasing endorphins, exercise and movement can actually help your nervous system become “unstuck.”

Try to exercise for 30 minutes or more on most days—or if it's easier, three 10-minute spurts of exercise per day are just as good. Exercise that is rhythmic and engages both your arms and legs—such as walking, running, swimming, basketball, or even dancing—works best. Instead of focusing on your thoughts or distracting yourself while you exercise, really focus on your body and how it feels as you move. Notice the sensation of your feet hitting the ground, for example, or the rhythm of your breathing, or the feeling of wind on your skin. Rock climbing, boxing, weight training, or martial arts can make this easier—after all, you need to focus on your body movements during these activities in order to avoid injury.

Tip 2: Don't isolate

Following a trauma, you may want to withdraw from others, but isolation only makes things worse. Connecting to others face to face will help you heal, so make an effort to maintain your relationships and avoid spending too much time alone.

You don't have to talk about the trauma. Connecting with others doesn't have to mean talking about the trauma. In fact, for some people, that can just make things worse. Comfort comes from feeling engaged and accepted by others.

Ask for support. While you don't have to talk about the trauma itself, it is important you have someone to share your feelings with face to face, someone who will listen attentively without judging you. Turn to a trusted family member, friend, counselor, or clergyman.

Participate in social activities, even if you don't feel like it. Do "normal" things with other people, things that have nothing to do with the traumatic experience.

Reconnect with old friends. If you've retreated from relationships that were once important to you, make the effort to reconnect.

Join a support group for trauma survivors. Being with others who are facing the same problems can help reduce your sense of isolation and hearing how others cope can help inspire you in your own recovery.

Volunteer. As well as helping others, [volunteering](/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm) can be a great way to challenge the sense of helplessness that often accompanies trauma. Remind yourself of your strengths and reclaim your sense of power by helping others.

Make new friends. If you live alone or far from family and friends, it's important to [reach out and make new friends](/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm) (/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm). Take a class or join a club to meet people with similar interests, connect to an alumni association, or reach out to neighbors or work colleagues.

[If connecting to others is difficult...](#)

Many people who have experienced trauma feel disconnected, withdrawn and find it difficult to connect with other people. If that describes you, there are some things you can do before you next sit down with a friend:

Exercise or move. Jump up and down, swing your arms and legs, or just flail around. Your head will feel clearer and you'll find it easier to connect.

Vocal toning. As strange as it sounds, vocal toning is a great way to open up to social engagement. Sit straight and simply make “mmm” sounds. Change the pitch and volume until you experience a pleasant vibration in your face.

Tip 3: Self-regulate your nervous system

No matter how agitated, anxious, or out of control you feel, it’s important to know that you can change your arousal system and calm yourself. Not only will it help relieve your anxiety but it will also engender a greater sense of control.

Mindful breathing. If you are feeling disoriented, confused, or upset, a quick way to calm yourself is through mindful breathing. Simply take 60 breaths, focusing your attention on each out breath.

Sensory input. Does a specific sight, smell or taste quickly make you feel calm? Or maybe petting an animal or listening to music works to quickly soothe you? Everyone responds to sensory input a little differently, so experiment to find what works best for you. See [Quick Stress Relief \(/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm\)](/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm).

Staying grounded. To feel in the present and more grounded, sit on a chair. Feel your feet on the ground and your back against the chair. Look around you and pick six objects that have red or blue in them. Notice how your breathing gets deeper and calmer.

Allow yourself to feel what you feel when you feel it. Acknowledge your feelings about the trauma as they arise and accept them. HelpGuide's [emotional intelligence toolkit \(/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/\)](/emotional-intelligence-toolkit/) can help.

Tip 4: Take care of your health

It's true: having a healthy body can increase your ability to cope with the stress of trauma.

Get plenty of sleep. After a traumatic experience, worry or fear may disturb your sleep patterns. But a lack of [quality sleep \(/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm\)](/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm) can exacerbate your trauma symptoms and make it harder to maintain your emotional balance. Go to sleep and get up at the same time each day and aim for 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night.

Avoid alcohol and drugs. Their use can worsen your trauma symptoms and increase feelings of depression, anxiety, and isolation.

Eat a well-balanced diet. Eating small, [well-balanced meals](/articles/healthy-eating/healthy-eating.htm) (/articles/healthy-eating/healthy-eating.htm) throughout the day will help you keep your energy up and minimize mood swings. Avoid sugary and fried foods and eat plenty of omega-3 fats—such as salmon, walnuts, soybeans, and flaxseeds—to give your mood a boost.

Reduce stress. Try [relaxation techniques](/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm) (/articles/stress/relaxation-techniques-for-stress-relief.htm) such as meditation, yoga, or deep breathing exercises. Schedule time for activities that bring you joy such as favorite hobbies.

When to seek professional help

Recovering from trauma takes time, and everyone heals at their own pace. But if months have passed and your symptoms aren't letting up, you may need professional help from a trauma expert.

Seek help for trauma if you're:

- Having trouble functioning at home or work
- Suffering from severe fear, anxiety, or depression
- Unable to form close, satisfying relationships
- Experiencing terrifying memories, nightmares, or flashbacks
- Avoiding more and more things that remind you of the trauma
- Emotionally numb and disconnected from others
- Using alcohol or drugs to feel better

Finding a trauma specialist

Working through trauma can be scary, painful, and potentially re-traumatizing, so this healing work is best done with the help of an experienced trauma specialist. [Finding the right therapist](/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm) (/articles/mental-health/finding-a-therapist-who-can-help-you-heal.htm) may take some time. It's very important that the therapist you choose has experience treating trauma. But the quality of the relationship with your therapist is equally important. Choose a trauma specialist you feel comfortable with. If you don't feel safe, respected, or understood, find another therapist.

Ask yourself:

- ▶ Did you feel comfortable discussing your problems with the therapist?
- ▶ Did you feel like the therapist understood what you were talking about?

- ▶ Were your concerns taken seriously or were they minimized or dismissed?
- ▶ Were you treated with compassion and respect?
- ▶ Do you believe that you could grow to trust the therapist?

Treatment for trauma

In order to heal from psychological and emotional trauma, you'll need to resolve the unpleasant feelings and memories you've long avoided, discharge pent-up "fight-or-flight" energy, learn to regulate strong emotions, and rebuild your ability to trust other people.

The following therapies are commonly used in the treatment of trauma:

Therapy approaches

Somatic experiencing focuses on bodily sensations, rather than thoughts and memories about the traumatic event. By concentrating on what's happening in your body, you can release pent-up trauma-related energy through shaking, crying, and other forms of physical release.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy helps you process and evaluate your thoughts and feelings about a trauma.

EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) incorporates elements of cognitive-behavioral therapy with eye movements or other forms of rhythmic, left-right stimulation that can "unfreeze" traumatic memories.

Helping a loved one deal with trauma

When a loved one has suffered trauma, your support can be a crucial factor in their recovery.

Be patient and understanding. Healing from trauma takes time. Be patient with the pace of recovery and remember that everyone's response to trauma is different. Don't judge your loved one's reaction against your own response or anyone else's.

Offer practical support to help your loved one get back into a normal routine. That may mean help with collecting groceries or housework, for example, or simply being available to talk or listen.

Don't pressure your loved one into talking but be available if they want to talk. Some trauma survivors find it difficult to talk about what happened. Don't force your loved one to open up but let them know you are there to listen if they want to talk, or available to just hang out if they don't.

Help your loved one to socialize and relax. Encourage them to participate in physical exercise, seek out friends, and pursue hobbies and other activities that bring them pleasure. Take a fitness class together or set a regular lunch date with friends.

Don't take the trauma symptoms personally. Your loved one may become angry, irritable, withdrawn, or emotionally distant. Remember that this is a result of the trauma and may not have anything to do with you or your relationship.

Helping a child recover from trauma

It's important to communicate openly with children following trauma. Let them know that it's normal to feel scared or upset. Your children may also look to you for cues on how they should respond to trauma so let them see you dealing with symptoms in a positive way.

How children react to emotional and psychological trauma

Some common reactions to trauma and ways to help your child deal with them:

- **Regression.** Many children need to return to an earlier stage when they felt safer. Younger children may wet the bed or want a bottle; older children may fear being alone. It's important to be understanding, patient and comforting if your child responds this way.
- **Thinking the event is their fault.** Children younger than 8 tend to think that if something goes wrong, it must be their fault. Be sure your child understands that he or she did not cause the event.
- **Sleep disorders.** Some children have difficulty falling to sleep; others wake frequently or have troubling dreams. Give your child a stuffed animal, soft blanket, or flashlight to take to bed. Try spending extra time together in the evening, doing quiet activities or reading. Be patient. It may take a while before your child can sleep through the night again.
- **Feeling helpless.** Being active in a campaign to prevent an event from happening again, writing thank you letters to people who have helped, and caring for others can bring a sense of hope and control to everyone in the family.

Source: *Sidran Institute*

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