

[ptsd & trauma](#)

How to Cope with Traumatic Events

Any traumatic event—from a personal tragedy to a global crisis—can take an emotional toll and cause traumatic stress. But there are ways to regain control of your life.



The emotional response to traumatic events

It's normal to experience traumatic stress following a disturbing event, whether it's a traffic accident, plane crash, violent crime, terrorist attack, global pandemic, or a natural disaster like an earthquake, hurricane, or flood. You may feel intense shock, confusion, and fear, or feel numb or overwhelmed by a host of conflicting emotions, sometimes all at once. And

these emotions aren't limited to the people who experienced the event. Round-the-clock news and social media coverage means that we're all bombarded with horrific images of tragedy, suffering, and loss almost the instant they occur anywhere in the world. Repeated exposure can overwhelm your nervous system and create traumatic stress just as if you experienced the event firsthand.

Traumatic stress can shatter your sense of security, leaving you feeling helpless and vulnerable in a dangerous world—especially if the traumatic event was manmade, such as a shooting or act of terrorism. You may feel physically and emotionally drained, overcome with grief, or find it difficult to focus, sleep, or control your temper. These are all normal responses to abnormal events.

Often, the unsettling thoughts and feelings of traumatic stress—as well as any unpleasant physical symptoms—start to fade as life gradually returns to normal over the days or weeks following a catastrophic event or crisis. But there's also a lot you can do to assist in your recovery and better come to terms with the trauma you've experienced. Whether you lived through the event itself, witnessed it, were an emergency responder or medical worker, or experienced traumatic stress in the aftermath, there are plenty of ways to calm your nervous system and regain your emotional balance.

[\[Read: Long COVID: Symptoms and Help for COVID Long Haulers\]](#)

Signs and symptoms of traumatic stress

Whether or not the traumatic event directly impacted you, it's normal to feel anxious, scared, and [uncertain about what the future may hold](#). Your nervous system has become overwhelmed by stress, triggering a wide range of intense emotions and physical reactions. These symptoms of traumatic stress can range from mild to severe and often come and go in waves. There may be times when you feel jumpy and anxious, for example, and other times when you feel disconnected and numb.

Emotional symptoms of traumatic stress include:

Shock and disbelief. You have a hard time accepting the reality of what happened, or feel numb and disconnected from your feelings.

Fear. You worry that the same thing will happen again, or that you'll lose control or break down.

Sadness or grief, especially if people you know died or suffered life-altering consequences.

[\[Read: Coping with Grief and Loss\]](#)

Helplessness. The sudden, unpredictable nature of violent crime, accidents, pandemics, or natural disasters can leave you feeling vulnerable and helpless, and even trigger anxiety or depression.

Guilt that you survived when others died, or feeling that you could have done more to help.

Anger. You may be angry at God, governments, or others you feel are responsible, or be prone to emotional outbursts.

Shame, especially over feelings or fears that you can't control.

Relief. You may feel relieved that the worst is over, that you weren't as badly affected as others, or even hopeful that your life will return to normal.

Physical symptoms include:

Feeling dizzy or faint, stomach tightening or churning, excessive sweating.

Trembling, shaking, experiencing cold sweats, having a lump in your throat, or feeling choked up.

Rapid breathing, pounding heart, even chest pains or difficulty breathing.

Racing thoughts, being unable to rest or stop pacing. You may also have difficulty concentrating, memory problems, or confusion.

Changes in your sleeping patterns. You experience insomnia or nightmares, for example.

Unexplained aches and pains, including headaches, changes in sexual function.

Loss or increase in appetite, or excessive consumption of alcohol, nicotine, or drugs.

What's the difference between traumatic stress and PTSD?

While the symptoms of traumatic stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) look very

similar immediately following a disaster or disturbing event, they progress very differently. As unpleasant as the symptoms of traumatic stress can be, they tend to gradually improve over time, especially if you take steps to care for your emotional health.

However, if your traumatic stress symptoms don't ease up and your nervous system remains "stuck," unable to move on from the event for a prolonged period of time, you may be experiencing PTSD.

With PTSD, you remain in psychological shock. The symptoms don't decrease and you don't feel a little better each day. In fact, you may even start to feel worse.

Read: [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder \(PTSD\)](#)

Dealing with traumatic stress

Just as it can often take time to clear the rubble and repair the damage following a disaster or traumatic event, it can also take time to recover your emotional equilibrium and rebuild your life. But there are specific things you can do to help yourself and your loved ones cope with the emotional aftermath of trauma—and find a way to move on with your life.

Remember there's no "right" or "wrong" way to feel. People react in different ways to trauma, so don't tell yourself (or anyone else) what you should be thinking, feeling, or doing.

Don't ignore your feelings—it will only slow recovery. It may seem better in the moment to avoid experiencing your emotions, but they exist whether you're paying attention to them or not. Even intense feelings will pass if you simply allow yourself to feel what you feel.

Avoid obsessively reliving the traumatic event. Repetitious thinking or viewing horrific images over and over can overwhelm your nervous system, making it harder to think clearly. Partake in activities that keep your mind occupied (read, watch a movie, cook, play with your kids), so you're not dedicating all your energy and attention to the traumatic event.

Reestablish routine. There is comfort in the familiar. After a disaster, getting back—as much as possible—to your normal routine, will help you minimize traumatic stress, anxiety, and hopelessness. Even if your work or school routine is disrupted, you can structure your day with regular times for eating, sleeping, spending time with family, and relaxing.

Put major life decisions on hold. Making big life decisions about home, work, or family while traumatized will only increase the stress in your life. If possible, try to wait until life has settled down, you've regained your emotional balance, and you're better able to think clearly.

If you're a first responder or medical worker

Emergency responders and medical workers are always called upon when there's a disaster or crisis. While helping others at their time of greatest need can be extremely rewarding, it also involves many challenges and stressors.

Witnessing tragedy and suffering, making life-and-death decisions, even placing yourself in harm's way, can take a toll on your mental health and cause traumatic stress. And since you may have to repeatedly deal with the aftermath of traumatic events over the course of your career, the emotional impact can snowball over time. If the stress is left unchecked, it can lead to [burnout, a state of emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion](#).

It's important to remember that taking care of your own needs is not selfish, even at a time of crisis. Rather, it's a necessity. After all, by allowing yourself to take breaks, leaning on others for support, and working in teams rather than alone for long periods, you'll have the energy and fortitude to better help others in need.

Coping with trauma tip 1: Minimize media exposure

While some survivors or witnesses of a traumatic event can regain a sense of control by watching media coverage of the event or by observing the recovery effort, others find that the reminders are further traumatizing. Excessive exposure to images of a disturbing event—such as repeatedly viewing video clips on social media or news sites—can even create traumatic stress in people not directly affected by the event, or cause those who were to be retraumatized.

Limit your media exposure to the traumatic event. Don't watch the news or check social media just before bed, and refrain from repeatedly viewing disturbing footage.

[\[Read: Social Media and Mental Health\]](#)

Try to avoid distressing images and video clips. If you want to stay up-to-date on events, read newspaper reports rather than watching television or viewing video clips of the event.

If coverage makes you feel overwhelmed, take a complete break from the news.

Avoid TV and online news and stop checking social media for a few days or weeks, until your traumatic stress symptoms ease up and you're able to move on.

Tip 2: Accept your feelings

Traumatic stress can cause you to experience all kinds of difficult and surprising emotions, including shock, anger, and guilt. These emotions are normal reactions to the loss of safety and security (as well as life, limb, and property) that comes in the wake of a disaster. Accepting these feelings and allowing yourself to feel what you feel, is necessary for healing.

Dealing with painful emotions

- Give yourself time to heal and to [mourn any losses](#) you've experienced.
- Don't try to force the healing process.
- Be patient with the pace of recovery.
- Be prepared for difficult and volatile emotions.
- Allow yourself to feel whatever you're feeling without judgment or guilt.
- Learn to [reconnect with uncomfortable emotions](#) without becoming overwhelmed.

Tip 3: Challenge your sense of helplessness

Overcoming traumatic stress is often about taking action. Positive action can help you overcome feelings of fear, helplessness, and hopelessness—and even small actions can make a big difference.

Volunteer your time, give blood, donate to a favorite charity, or comfort others. If [formal volunteering](#) sounds like too much of a commitment, remember that simply being helpful and friendly to others can deliver stress-reducing pleasure and challenge your sense of helplessness. Help a neighbor carry in their groceries, hold a door open for a stranger, share a smile with the people you meet during the day.

Connect with others affected by the traumatic event or participate in memorials, events, and other public rituals. Feeling connected to others and remembering the lives lost or broken in the event can help overcome the sense of hopelessness that often follows a tragedy.

Tip 4: Get moving

It may be the last thing you feel like doing when you're experiencing traumatic stress, but [exercising can burn off adrenaline and release feel-good endorphins](#) to boost your mood. Physical activity performed mindfully can also rouse your nervous system from that "stuck" feeling and help you move on from the traumatic event.

Try exercise that is rhythmic and engages both your arms and legs. Walking, running, swimming, basketball, or dancing are good choices.

Add a mindful element by focusing 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 it easier [to be mindful](#) and focus on your body movements—after all, if you don't, you could injure yourself.

Boost your energy and motivation. If you're struggling to find the energy or motivation to exercise, start by playing your favorite music and moving around or dancing. Once you get moving, you'll start to feel more energetic.

[\[Read: Best Exercises for Health and Weight Loss\]](#)

Shorter bursts of activity are as beneficial as one longer session. Aim to exercise for 30 minutes or more each day—or if it's easier, three 10-minute spurts of exercise are just as good for you.

Tip 5: Reach out to others

You may be tempted to withdraw from friends and social activities following a traumatic event, but connecting face to face with other people is vital to recovery. The simple act of talking face to face with another human can trigger hormones that relieve traumatic stress.

You don't have to talk about your traumatic experiences. Reaching out to others doesn't necessarily mean talking about the traumatic event. Comfort comes from feeling connected and involved with others you trust. Talk about and do "normal" things with friends and loved ones, things that have nothing to do with the event that triggered your traumatic stress.

Expand your social network. If you live alone or your social network is limited, it's never

too late to reach out to others and [make new friends](#). Take advantage of support groups, church gatherings, and community organizations. Join a sports team or hobby club to meet people with similar interests.

Reaching out when you're cut off from others

While substitutes for face-to-face contact don't have the same mental health benefits, sometimes it's not always possible to see friends and loved ones in-person following a disaster or crisis.

Perhaps you're temporarily kept apart by travel conditions, quarantining, or a lockdown during a pandemic, for example. In these circumstances, reach out to loved ones via video chat, telephone, social media, or text messaging—any way you can to feel a connection and remind yourself that you're not alone at this time.

Tip 6: Make stress reduction a priority

While a certain amount of stress is normal, and can even be helpful, as you face the challenges that come in the aftermath of a disaster or tragic event, [too much stress](#) will interfere with recovery.

Relieve stress in the moment. To [quickly calm yourself](#) in any situation, simply take 60 breaths, focusing your attention on each "out" breath. Or use sensory input by engaging one or more of your senses—sight, sound, taste, smell, touch—or movement. For example, does listening to an uplifting song make you feel calm? Or smelling ground coffee? Or maybe petting an animal works quickly to make you feel centered? Everyone responds to sensory input a little differently, so experiment to find what works best for you.

[\[Read: Quick Stress Relief\]](#)

Practice relaxation techniques such as [meditation, yoga, or deep breathing](#) to reduce stress, ease anxiety and depression, and improve your sleep.

Schedule time for activities that bring you joy—a favorite hobby or pastime, or a chat with a cherished friend.

Use your downtime to relax. Read a book, take a bath, or enjoy an uplifting or funny

movie.

How to feel grounded when you're traumatized

When you feel overwhelmed by traumatic stress, try this simple exercise:

- Sit on a chair, with your feet on the ground and your back supported by the chair.
- Look around you and pick six objects that have red or blue in them. This should allow you to feel engaged in the present, more grounded and in your body. Notice how your breath gets deeper and calmer.
- Alternately, you may want to go outdoors and find a peaceful place to sit on the grass, and feel supported by the ground.

Tip 7: Eat and sleep well

The food you eat can improve or worsen your mood and affect your ability to cope with traumatic stress. Eating a diet full of processed and convenience food, [refined carbohydrates, and sugary snacks](#) can worsen symptoms of traumatic stress. Conversely, eating a diet rich in fresh fruit and vegetables, high-quality protein, and [healthy fats](#), especially omega-3 fatty acids, can help you better cope with the ups and downs that follow a tragic event.

By replacing processed food with real food as close to its natural state as possible, you can develop an eating plan that not only helps to relieve traumatic stress, but also improves your energy, outlook, and overall sense of well-being.

Get enough quality sleep

After experiencing a traumatic event, you may find it difficult to sleep. Worries and fears may keep you up at night or disturbing dreams may trouble you. Since a lack of sleep places considerable stress on your mind and body—and makes it more difficult to maintain your emotional balance—getting quality rest after a disaster is essential.

The following strategies can help [improve your sleep](#):

- Go to sleep and get up at the same time each day.
- Avoid caffeine in the afternoon or evening and limit alcohol intake as it disrupts sleep.
- Do something relaxing before bed, like listening to soothing music, reading a book, or

meditating.

- Make your bedroom as quiet, dark, and soothing as possible.
- Get regular exercise—but not too close to bedtime.

When to seek professional treatment

Usually, feelings of anxiety, numbness, confusion, guilt, and despair following a disaster or traumatic event will start to fade within a relatively short time. However, if your traumatic stress reaction is so intense and persistent that it's getting in the way of your ability to function, you may need help from a mental health professional—preferably a trauma specialist.

Traumatic stress red flags include:

- It's been six weeks, and you're not feeling any better.
- You're having trouble functioning at home and work.
- You're experiencing terrifying memories, nightmares, or flashbacks.
- You're having an increasingly difficult time connecting and relating to others.
- You're experiencing suicidal thoughts or feelings.
- You're avoiding more and more things that remind you of the disaster or traumatic event.

If your child has been traumatized ...

The intense, confusing, and frightening emotions that follow a traumatic event can be even more pronounced in children—whether they directly experienced the event or were repeatedly exposed to disturbing media coverage. But you can help your child cope with traumatic stress and move on from the event.

Read: [Helping Children Cope with Trauma](#)

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Get more help

[Common Reactions After Trauma](#) - Guide to the common symptoms, effects, and problems that can result from emotional or psychological trauma. (National Center for PTSD)

[Coping after a traumatic event](#) - Includes things you should and shouldn't do. (Royal College of Psychiatrists)