



## Traumatic Stress

### Dealing with Trauma After a Disaster or Disturbing Event



The emotional toll from a traumatic event can cause intense, confusing, and frightening emotions. And these emotions aren't limited to the people who experienced the event. Round-the-clock news coverage means that we're all bombarded with horrific images from natural disasters, violent crimes, and terrorist attacks almost the instant they occur anywhere in the world. Repeated exposure can trigger traumatic stress and leave you feeling hopeless and helpless. Whether you were directly involved in the traumatic event or exposed to it after the fact, there are steps you can take to recover your emotional equilibrium and regain control of your life.

### What is traumatic stress?

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Traumatic stress is a normal reaction to a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, motor vehicle accident, plane crash, violent crime, or terrorist attack. Such events are extraordinarily stressful—not just for survivors, but also witnesses and even those repeatedly exposed to the horrific images of the traumatic event circulated on social media and news sources.

In fact, while it's highly unlikely any of us will ever be the direct victims of a terrorist attack or mass shooting, for example, we're all regularly bombarded by disturbing images from around the world of those innocent people who have been. Viewing these images over and over can overwhelm your nervous system and create traumatic stress. Your sense of security shatters, leaving you feeling helpless and vulnerable in a dangerous world, especially if the event was manmade, such as a shooting or act of terrorism. But whether

you lived through the event itself, witnessed it in person, or experienced traumatic stress in the aftermath, there are plenty of things you can do to calm your nervous system and regain your emotional balance. The first step is to recognize the warning signs of traumatic stress.

## Traumatic stress signs and symptoms

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Whether or not you were directly impacted by the traumatic event, 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 reactions to traumatic stress often come and go in waves. There may be times when you feel jumpy and anxious, and other times when you feel disconnected and numb. Other normal emotional responses to traumatic events include:

**Shock and disbelief** – you may have a hard time accepting the reality of what happened

**Fear** – that the same thing will happen again, or that you'll lose control or break down

**Sadness** – particularly if people you know died

**Helplessness** – the sudden, unpredictable nature of violent crime, accidents, or natural disasters may leave you feeling vulnerable and helpless

**Guilt** – that you survived when others died, or that you could have done more to help

**Anger** – you may be angry at God or others you feel are responsible

**Shame** – especially over feelings or fears you can't control

**Relief** – you may feel relieved that the worst is over, and even hopeful that your life will return to normal

### Normal physical responses to traumatic events

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The physical symptoms of traumatic stress can include:

- Trembling or shaking
- Pounding heart
- Rapid breathing
- Lump in throat; feeling choked up
- Stomach tightening or churning
- Feeling dizzy or faint
- Cold sweats
- Racing thoughts

## How to deal with traumatic stress

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Usually, the unsettling thoughts and feelings of traumatic stress—as well as any unpleasant physical symptoms—start to fade as life returns to normal over the days or weeks following a traumatic event. However, it's important to remember that people react in different ways to trauma.

**There is no “right” or “wrong” way to respond.** We're all different, so don't tell yourself (or anyone else) what you should be thinking, feeling, or doing.

**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. Do things 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.

**Ignoring your feelings will 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.

**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.

**Recognize when traumatic stress becomes PTSD.** 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 Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).



(/articles/ptsd-trauma/ptsd-symptoms-self-help-treatment.htm)

**PTSD:** (/articles/ptsd-trauma/ptsd-symptoms-self-help-treatment.htm) Symptoms, Treatment, and Self-Help

While symptoms of traumatic stress often naturally fade with time, the following tips can assist the process and help you better come to terms with the traumatic experience.

## Traumatic stress recovery tip 1: Minimize media exposure

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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 the reminders can be 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.

**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.

**Try to avoid distressing images and video clips.** If you want to stay up-to-date on events, read the newspaper 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

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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 the painful emotions of traumatic stress

- ▶ Give yourself time to heal and to [mourn any losses](/articles/grief/coping-with-grief-and-loss.htm) (/articles/grief/coping-with-grief-and-loss.htm) 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 to uncomfortable emotions](/articles/mental-health/emotional-intelligence-toolkit.htm) (/articles/mental-health/emotional-intelligence-toolkit.htm) without becoming overwhelmed .

### Tip 3: Challenge your sense of helplessness

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

[Volunteer your time](/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm), give blood, donate to a favorite charity, or comfort others.



(/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm)

[Volunteering and it's Surprising Benefits:](/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm) (/articles/healthy-living/volunteering-and-its-surprising-benefits.htm) How Giving Improves Your Life

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

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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 focus on your body movements—after all, if you don't you could get injured.
- ▶ **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.
- ▶ **Shorter bursts of activity are as good 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.

## Tip 5: Reach out to others

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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** (</articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm>). 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](/articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm) (</articles/relationships-communication/making-good-friends.htm>). Take advantage of support groups, church gatherings, and community organizations. Join a sports team or hobby club to meet people with similar interests.

## Tip 6: Make stress reduction a priority

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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](/articles/stress/stress-symptoms-signs-and-causes.htm) (</articles/stress/stress-symptoms-signs-and-causes.htm>) will get in the way of recovery.



(/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm)

**Quick Stress Relief:** (/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm) Using Your Senses to Alleviate Stress

**Relieve stress in the moment.** To [quickly calm yourself](/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm) (/articles/stress/quick-stress-relief.htm) 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.

**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, a chat with a cherished friend.

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

**Get plenty of sleep.** Lack of sleep places considerable stress on your mind and body and makes it more difficult to maintain your emotional balance. To ensure you get the 7 to 9 hours of refreshing [sleep you need each night](/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm) (/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm), establish a relaxing bedtime routine, avoid screens an hour before bed, and make your bedroom as dark, quiet, and comfortable as possible.

## Feel grounded in times of traumatic stress

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Sit on a chair, feel 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 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.

Source: *Emotional First Aid*, Gina Ross, MFCC, and Peter Levine, Ph.D.

### Make time to relax

**Practice relaxation techniques** such as [meditation](#) (/harvard/benefits-of-mindfulness.htm), yoga, or Tai Chi.

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

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

**Get plenty of sleep.** Lack of sleep places considerable stress on your mind and body and makes it more difficult to maintain your emotional balance. Aim for somewhere between 7 to 9 hours of refreshing [sleep each night](#) (/articles/sleep/getting-better-sleep.htm).

### Reestablish a routine—structure is comforting

There is comfort in the familiar. After a traumatic event, getting back to your normal routine as much as possible will help you minimize stress.

- ▶ Even if your work or school routine is disrupted, structure your day with regular times for eating, sleeping, exercising, and spending time with friends.
- ▶ Do things that keep your mind occupied (read, watch a movie, cook, play with your kids), so you're not dedicating all your attention to the traumatic event.

## Tip 7: Eat a healthy diet

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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](#) (/articles/healthy-eating/choosing-healthy-fats.htm), especially omega-3 fatty acids, can help you better cope with the ups and downs that follow a tragic event.

By experimenting with new ways of eating that boosts mental health, you can find an eating plan that not only helps to relieve traumatic stress, but also boosts your energy and improves your overall outlook and sense of well-being.

## When to seek treatment for traumatic stress

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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've 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 traumatic stress...

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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](#) (/articles/ptsd-trauma/helping-children-cope-with-traumatic-stress.htm)

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