

# Traumatic Experiences Guide

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A traumatic experience difficult situation becomes a traumatic event when it is a sudden, extreme, abnormal and fearful experience. The traumatic experience is an event that falls completely outside the scope of your normal life. The experience does not fit within your image of how the world should be put together and how you should function within it. It is an event that provokes very strong emotions, such as fear, rage or powerlessness'. Traumatic experiences are sudden and acutely shocking experience that washes over the individual, rendering him or her powerless for a brief or a longer period of time. The event can lead to a post-traumatic stress reaction or even disorders'. A traumatic experience is a very shocking event of a special order, which renders the individual temporarily helpless or hopeless. Normal mechanisms of self- maintenance are often made redundant but not always: some may actually be activated. The normal coping repertoire (link to what is coping?) is no longer there.

Traumatic experiences are experiences that cause emotional or psychological trauma that may be difficult to cope with and can result in various other psychological disorders. People who have suffered a traumatic experience such as abuse, being in an explosion, a terrible wreck or war may show signs of post traumatic stress disorder, dissociative identity disorder or *MPD*, or one of many other psychological disorders. When bad things happen, the mind may naturally take a while to get over the emotional pain that is associated with the traumatic experience. It may take weeks or even months before the individual feels safe again and for some the pain can last for many years. Depending on the severity of the traumatic experience, the age of the individual and the coping mechanisms that are used, various types of treatment may be offered in order to help an individual to recover from the emotional and psychological trauma associated with traumatic experiences.

## Traumatic Experiences Symptoms

Traumatic experiences will usually involve a threat to life or to the individual's safety. Any situation that leaves the individual feeling overwhelmed and alone may be considered a traumatic experience no matter how threatening or (not threatening) it is. It's the emotional experience of the individual and how they cope with an event that determines whether the event was a traumatic experience or not. The more scared or frightened an individual is as a result of an experience or event the more likely that event is to be considered traumatic.

Not all stressful events are considered traumatic experiences. Some stressful events carry certain characteristics that are likely to cause the event to be more traumatic than others. For instance, if the event happened unexpectedly or the individual was unprepared for it there is an increased likelihood that the stress can cause emotional or psychological trauma. Additionally, stressful events that happen repeatedly such as physical or sexual abuse may also be considered traumatic. Childhood abuse of any kind is often traumatic to the individual.

## Risks Associated with Increased Vulnerability to Traumatic Experiences

Although most everyone will suffer a traumatic experience at least once in their lifetime, not all traumatic experiences will lead to lasting emotional or psychological damage. For some people, a traumatic experience can be quickly overcome and the coping mechanisms are in place to result in a full recovery from the emotional trauma but for others certain experiences may cause lasting shock, devastation and

trauma. Certain risk factors do make an individual more susceptible to emotional trauma or psychological damage as a result of traumatic experiences. People who are under heavy stress at work or at home are more likely to suffer from a traumatic experience that leaves them traumatized. Additionally, those who have already suffered a series of traumatic experiences and who may seem to be coping well with the issues are at an increased risk of further emotional or psychological damage if another traumatic event were to occur.

## Traumatic Experiences During Childhood

Children who suffer traumatic experiences are likely to have lasting effects emotionally and psychologically. Certain traumatic events such as being abused physically or sexually can cause serious changes in the psychosis of a child that lasts well into adulthood. Childhood trauma that is left unresolved can carry into adulthood and may even set the stage for future trauma as an adult.

Anything that disrupts the child's sense of safety or security is considered childhood trauma and may cause significant emotional and psychological damage. Children who have unstable living shelters or who live in an unsafe environment, those who have a serious illness or who must endure intrusive medical procedures (especially at an early age under 3 years old) may have serious emotional and psychological damage as a result of the traumatic experiences. Neglect, bullying or sexual, physical or verbal abuse can also cause emotional instability in a child.

## Symptoms of Emotional Trauma

Emotional trauma symptoms may include shock or denial or disbelief of an event or of the occurrence of an event. People suffering from emotional trauma may be confused and have difficulty concentrating and they may even have fear or anxiety associated with the traumatic experience. Feelings of numbness, depression and sadness are all possible. Some people who suffer from traumatic experiences will also feel guilt, shame or anger when they think about the traumatic experience that they endured.

## Physical Symptoms of Trauma

Physically, the symptoms of trauma include being startled easily and having a racing heartbeat. People who have suffered traumatic experiences may have trouble sleeping, suffer from insomnia or have frequent nightmares related to the event. Fatigue and difficulty concentrating as well as muscle tension and aches and pains are all common physical symptoms of trauma. The physical symptoms of trauma may only last a few days or a few months and in most cases will subside as the individual gradually processes the traumatic event and learns how to cope appropriately.

## Treatment for Psychological or Emotional Trauma

There are various treatments available for those who have suffered from traumatic experiences. Healing from trauma is a long term process and may involve being faced with feelings and memories that the individual would much rather avoid. The process of healing from trauma related memories and feelings involved rehashing those thoughts and learning how to effectively cope with the emotional and psychological pain associated with the memories.

Various types of therapy exist to treat emotional and psychological trauma. Somatic experiencing, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing as well as cognitive behavioral therapy may all be used to

help an individual who has suffered traumatic experiences to cope with the pain. Depending on the severity of the experience and the symptoms, some people may also respond well to medication based treatment which may involve the use of antidepressants and other prescription medications to treat the emotional and psychological trauma that is left behind.

## Effects of Traumatic Experiences

When people find themselves suddenly in danger, sometimes they are overcome with feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror. These events are called traumatic experiences. Some common traumatic Experiences include being physically attacked, being in a serious accident, being in combat, being sexually assaulted, and being in a fire or a disaster like a hurricane or a tornado. After traumatic experiences, people may have problems that they didn't have before the event. If these problems are severe and the survivor does not get help for them, they can begin to cause problems in the survivor's family. This fact sheet explains how traumas can affect those who experience them. This fact sheet also describes family members' reactions to the traumatic event and to the trauma survivor's symptoms and behaviors. Finally, suggestions are made about what a survivor and his or her family can do to get help for PTSD.

## How do traumatic experiences affect people?

People who go through traumatic experiences often have symptoms and problems afterward. How serious the symptoms and problems are depends on many things including a person's life experiences before the trauma, a person's own natural ability to cope with stress, how serious the trauma was, and what kind of help and support a person gets from family, friends, and professionals immediately following the trauma. Because most trauma survivors are not familiar with how trauma affects people, they often have trouble understanding what is happening to them. They may think the trauma is their fault, that they are going crazy, or that there is something wrong with them because other people who experienced the trauma don't appear to have the same problems. Survivors may turn to drugs or alcohol to make themselves feel better. They may turn away from friends and family who don't seem to understand. They may not know what to do to get better.

## What do trauma survivors need to know?

- Traumas happen to many competent, healthy, strong, good people. No one can completely protect him- or herself from traumatic experiences.
- Many people have long-lasting problems following exposure to trauma. Up to 8% of individuals will have PTSD at some time in their lives.
- People who react to traumas are not going crazy. They are experiencing symptoms and problems that are connected with having been in a traumatic situation.
- Having symptoms after a traumatic event is not a sign of personal weakness. Many psychologically well-adjusted and physically healthy people develop PTSD. Probably everyone would develop PTSD if they were exposed to a severe enough trauma.
- When a person understands trauma symptoms better, he or she can become less fearful of them and better able to manage them.

- By recognizing the effects of trauma and knowing more about symptoms, a person is better able to decide about getting treatment.

## What are the common effects of trauma?

During a trauma, survivors often become overwhelmed with fear. Soon after the traumatic experience, they may re-experience the trauma mentally and physically. Because this can be uncomfortable and sometimes painful, survivors tend to avoid reminders of the trauma. These symptoms create a problem that is called posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a specific set of problems resulting from a traumatic experience and is recognized by medical and mental-health professionals.

### Re-experiencing Symptoms:

Trauma survivors commonly re-experience their traumas. This means that the survivor experiences again the same mental, emotional, and physical experiences that occurred during or just after the trauma. These include thinking about the trauma, seeing images of the event, feeling agitated, and having physical sensations like those that occurred during the trauma.

Trauma survivors find themselves feeling as if they are in danger, experiencing panic sensations, wanting to escape, getting angry, and thinking about attacking or harming someone else. Because they are anxious and physically agitated, they may have trouble sleeping and concentrating. The survivor usually can't control these symptoms or stop them from happening. Mentally re-experiencing the trauma can include:

- Upsetting memories such as images or thoughts about the trauma
- Feeling as if the trauma is happening again (flashbacks)
- Bad dreams and nightmares
- Getting upset when reminded about the trauma (by something the person sees, hears, feels, smells, or tastes)
- Anxiety or fear, feeling in danger again
- Anger or aggressive feelings and feeling the need to defend oneself
- Trouble controlling emotions because reminders lead to sudden anxiety, anger, or upset
- Trouble concentrating or thinking clearly

### People also can have physical reactions to trauma reminders such as:

- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Feeling agitated and constantly on the lookout for danger
- Getting very startled by loud noises or something or someone coming up on you from behind when you don't expect it
- Feeling shaky and sweaty
- Having your heart pound or having trouble breathing

Because trauma survivors have these upsetting feelings when they feel stress or are reminded of their trauma, they often act as if they are in danger again. They might get overly concerned about staying safe in situations that are not truly dangerous. For example, a person living in a safe neighborhood might still feel that he has to have an alarm system, double locks on the door, a locked fence, and a guard dog. Because traumatized people often feel like they are in danger even when they are not, they may be overly aggressive

and lash out to protect themselves when there is no need. For example, a person who was attacked might be quick to yell at or hit someone who seems to be threatening.

Re-experiencing symptoms are a sign that the body and mind are actively struggling to cope with the traumatic experience. These symptoms are automatic, learned responses to trauma reminders. The trauma has become associated with many things so that when the person experiences these things, he or she is reminded of the trauma and feels that he or she is in danger again. It is also possible that re-experiencing symptoms are actually a part of the mind's attempt to make sense of what has happened.

## Avoidance Symptoms:

Because thinking about the trauma and feeling as if you are in danger is upsetting, people who have been through traumas often try to avoid reminders of the trauma. Sometimes survivors are aware that they are avoiding reminders, but other times survivors do not realize that their behavior is motivated by the need to avoid reminders of the trauma.

Ways of avoiding thoughts, feelings, and sensations associated with the trauma can include:

- Actively avoiding trauma-related thoughts and memories
- Avoiding conversations and staying away from places, activities, or people that might remind you of the trauma
- Trouble remembering important parts of what happened during the trauma
- Shutting down emotionally or feeling emotionally numb
- Trouble having loving feelings or feeling any strong emotions
- Finding that things around you seem strange or unreal
- Feeling strange
- Feeling disconnected from the world around you and things that happen to you
- Avoiding situations that might make you have a strong emotional reaction
- Feeling weird physical sensations
- Feeling physically numb
- Not feeling pain or other sensations
- Losing interest in things you used to enjoy doing

Trying to avoid thinking about the trauma and avoiding treatment for trauma-related problems may keep a person from feeling upset in the short term, but avoiding treatment means that in the long term, trauma symptoms will persist.

## WHAT IS A TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE?

A traumatic experience is an event in which an individual experiences, or witnesses an actual or threatened serious injury or death. The threat or actual occurrence may be to oneself or others. It is quite normal for people to experience emotional and physical after shocks or stress reactions following a traumatic event. Sometimes these after-shocks appear immediately after the event.

However, sometimes it takes a few hours, days or even weeks before stress reactions appear. An individual's response may include intense fear, helplessness, or horror. Depending on the severity of the event, the signs and symptoms of these reactions may last a few days, several weeks or months, or longer. The way individuals cope with crisis depends on their own history and prior experiences. Sometimes these traumatic events are so painful that professional assistance may be necessary in order to cope with them.

## WHAT IS CRISIS INTERVENTION?

Crisis intervention offers immediate, intensive, and brief professional assistance to people who have had a traumatic experience. The purpose is to help an individual cope and return to a previous level of physical or emotional functioning without being at risk of endangering himself/herself or others. This short-term professional support attempts to deal with the immediate crisis or problem. Prompt and focused interventions help prevent the development of a serious long-term disability. Crisis intervention also encourages the development of new coping skills to help the individual function more effectively.

## TYPES OF CRISES

People filter threatening experiences through their own unique ways of thinking and feeling. Depending on the trauma and one's "filter", some people may have less of a reaction while others may develop more severe symptoms. A number of crises may occur that can affect different groups of people like students, employees or society as a whole. At one end of the continuum these crises could include a strike, assault, physical injury, accident, death, suicide, robbery, homicide, and rape. Other events that affect a broader spectrum of people would include: fire, natural disasters, riots, terrorism and racial incidents. Crisis intervention offers the immediate help that an individual in crisis needs in order to reestablish equilibrium.

## SECONDARY TRAUMA

People at risk for secondary traumatization are those other than the actual victims who are affected by the traumatic event. This may include friends, family and acquaintances of the victim or people who have simply heard about the trauma or crisis. People who help trauma and crisis victims are sometimes at risk for secondary trauma as well. This may be due to consistent exposure to human suffering and possibly feeling responsible for the safety of the victim.

## SYMPTOMS AND REACTIONS

People whose normal lives are disturbed by a traumatic event find that their sense of security and safety is shattered. They also find that their responses to life and other people are either greatly exaggerated or no longer exist. The following are some of the symptoms that one might encounter:

## Possible Emotional Reactions

- **Intense emotion and reactivity:** People may feel intense anxiety, pain, fear, shame, grief, horror, anger, and shock. They may also have difficulty relaxing or falling asleep.
- **Numbness:** When people are overwhelmed, they may experience shock and protect themselves through detachment, denial, and disbelief. They may feel isolated and disconnected from people or even their own normal feelings.
- **Depression:** People may have difficulty concentrating or remembering. They may also experience diminished interest in everyday activities and have crying spells. A sense of despair and hopelessness may be very evident.
- **Flashbacks:** People often re-experience the traumatic event over and over again. The feeling of not having any control is heightened. They may feel tortured by the invading thoughts and memories.
- **Nightmares:** These are like flashbacks but they occur in dreams. As a result, people may have difficulty sleeping. Re-experiencing the trauma intensifies feelings of panic and helplessness.
- **Triggering events and people:** Often, people will attempt to avoid anything associated with the trauma. However, events that remind them of the trauma may trigger feelings initially triggered by the trauma itself.

## Possible Physical Reactions

- Aches and pains such as headaches, and backaches, etc.
- Weakness, dizziness, and fatigue most of the time.
- Heart palpitations, profuse sweating and chills.
- Changes in sleep patterns.
- Changes in appetite and digestive problems.
- Being easily startled by noises and/or unexpected touch.
- Increased susceptibility to allergies, colds and illnesses.
- Increased alcohol consumption and/or substance abuse.

## How to Better Cope

- Recognize your own feelings. Also understand that your feelings are a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.
- Talk about the experience. Talk is healing.
- Reach out to friends and family for support. Try to connect with others, especially those who may have shared the same stressful experience. Form a support group.
- Set small realistic goals to help tackle obstacles. Take one day at a time and be kind to yourself.
- Get as much physical activity as possible. Exercise or learn relaxation techniques or meditation in order to relax and feel rejuvenated.
- Structure your time. Schedule breaks for yourself. Redefine your priorities and focus your energy on them.
- Get involved in something that is personally meaningful and important everyday.

- Give yourself time to heal.
- Give someone a hug-touching is very important.

## What are common secondary and associated posttraumatic symptoms?

*Secondary* symptoms are problems that arise because of the posttraumatic re-experiencing and avoidance symptoms. For example, because a person wants to avoid talking about a traumatic event, she might cut off from friends, which would eventually cause her to feel lonely and depressed. As time passes after a traumatic experience, more secondary symptoms may develop. Over time, secondary symptoms can become more troubling and disabling than the original re-experiencing and avoidance symptoms.

*Associated* symptoms don't come directly from being overwhelmed with fear; they occur because of other things that were going on at the time of the trauma. For example, a person who is psychologically traumatized in a car accident might also be physically injured and then get depressed because he can't work or leave the house.

All of these problems can be secondary or associated trauma symptoms:

*Depression* can develop when a person has losses connected with the trauma or when a person avoids other people and becomes isolated.

*Despair and hopelessness* can result when a person is afraid that he or she will never feel better again.

Survivors may lose *important beliefs* when a traumatic event makes them lose faith that the world is a good and safe place.

*Aggressive behavior toward oneself or others* can result from frustration over the inability to control PTSD symptoms (feeling that PTSD symptoms run your life). People may also become aggressive when other things that happened at the time of trauma make the person angry (the unfairness of the situation). Some people are aggressive because they grew up with people who lashed out and they were never taught other ways to cope with angry feelings. Because angry feelings may keep others at a distance, they may stop a person from having positive connections and getting help. Anger and aggression can cause job problems, marital and relationship problems, and loss of friendships.

*Self-blame, guilt, and shame* can arise when PTSD symptoms make it hard to fulfill current responsibilities. They can also occur when people fall into the common trap of second-guessing what they did or didn't do at the time of a trauma. Many people, in trying to make sense of their experience, blame themselves. This is usually completely unwarranted and fails to hold accountable those who may have actually been responsible for the event. Self-blame causes a lot of distress and can prevent a person from reaching out for help. Sometimes society also blames the victim of a trauma. Unfortunately, this may reinforce the survivor's hesitation to seek help.

People who have experienced traumas may have *problems in relationships with others* because they often have a hard time feeling close to people or trusting people. This is especially likely to happen when the trauma was caused or worsened by other people (as opposed to an accident or natural disaster).

Trauma survivors may *feel detached or disconnected from others* because they have difficulty feeling or expressing positive feelings. After traumas, people can become overwhelmed by their problems or become numb and stop putting energy into their relationships with friends and family.

Survivors may get into *arguments and fights with other people* because of the angry or aggressive feelings that are common after a trauma. Also, a person's constant avoidance of social situations (such as family gatherings) may create hurt feelings or animosity in the survivor's relationships.

*Less interest or participation in things the person used to like to do* may result from depression following a trauma. When a person spends less time doing fun things and being with people, he or she has fewer chances to feel good and have pleasant interactions.

*Social isolation* can happen because of social withdrawal and a lack of trust in others. This often leads to the loss of support, friendships, and intimacy, and it increases fears and worries.

Survivors may have *problems with identity* when PTSD symptoms change important aspects of a person's life such as relationships or whether the person can do his or her work well. A person may also question his or her identity because of the way he or she acted during a trauma. For instance, a person who thinks of himself as unselfish might think he acted selfishly by saving himself during a disaster. This might make him question whether he really is who he thought he was.

*Feeling permanently damaged* can result when trauma symptoms don't go away and a person doesn't believe they will get better.

Survivors may develop *problems with self-esteem* because PTSD symptoms make it hard for a person to feel good about him- or herself. Sometimes, because of how they behaved at the time of the trauma, survivors feel that they are bad, worthless, stupid, incompetent, evil, etc.

*Physical health symptoms and problems* can happen because of long periods of physical agitation or arousal from anxiety. Trauma survivors may also avoid medical care because it reminds them of their trauma and causes anxiety, and this may lead to poorer health. For example, a rape survivor may not visit a gynecologist and an injured motor vehicle accident survivor may avoid doctors because they remind him or her that a trauma occurred. Habits used to cope with posttraumatic stress, like alcohol use, can also cause health problems. In addition, other things that happened at the time of the trauma may cause health problems (for example, an injury).

Survivors may turn to *alcohol and drug abuse* when they want to avoid the bad feelings that come with PTSD symptoms. Many people use alcohol and drugs as a way to try to cope with upsetting trauma symptoms, but it actually leads to more problems.

### Remember:

Although individuals with PTSD may feel overwhelmed by their symptoms, it is important for them to remember that there are other, positive aspects of their lives. There are helpful mental health and medical resources available (see link below), and survivors have their strengths, interests, commitments, relationships with others, past experiences that were not traumatic, desires, and hopes for the future.

**Note:** *A lot of our youth may struggle with PTSD without knowing it. Their environmental factors such as community infrastructure, family problems (i.e. incarcerated or drug addicted parent) and social reaction to their personal struggles (i.e. learning disability, physical handicaps, emotional/psychology disorders) may create distorted views of (whether right or wrong) that control their daily mode of operation. Try not to predict or label them with PTSD, but be aware of the effects it may have on their outlook and efforts to the goals and dreams.*