

Coping with a Traumatic Event

Most people have experienced traumatic and stressful events in their lives. These times 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. They may also have an impact on people who have seen the event either firsthand or on television.

Common Responses to Tragedy

Emotional responses to traumatic events may vary. People may exhibit 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.

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an intense physical and emotional response to thoughts and reminders of the event that lasts 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 the numbing of emotions. Physical reactions can include uncontrollable shaking, chills, heart palpitations and tension headaches.
- Symptoms of avoidance include staying away from activities, places, thoughts or feelings related to the trauma or feeling estranged from others.
- Symptoms of increased arousal include being overly alert or easily startled, difficulty sleeping, irritability, outbursts of anger and lack of concentration.

Other symptoms linked with PTSD include panic attacks, depression, suicidal thoughts and feelings, drug abuse, feelings of being isolated and not being able to complete daily tasks.

Ways to Cope with Tragedy

There are many things you can do to cope with traumatic events:

- Understand that your symptoms may be normal, especially right after the trauma.
- Keep to your usual routine.
- Take the time to resolve day-to-day conflicts so they do not add to your stress.
- Do not shy away from situations, people and places that remind you of the trauma.
- Find ways to relax and be kind to yourself.
- Turn to family, friends and clergy for support. Talk about your experiences and feelings with them.
- Participate in leisure and recreational activities.
- Recognize that you cannot control everything.

- Recognize the need for trained help, and call a local mental health center.

There are also things you can do to help 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 to Contact a Doctor about PTSD

About half of those with PTSD recover within three months without treatment. Sometimes symptoms do not go away 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 affect your relationship with your family and friends, or affect your 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.

Resources

- SAMHSA's National Mental Health Information Center: www.samhsa.gov
- National Center for PTSD: www.ptsd.va.gov
- National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov
- The American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress: www.aaets.org
- Anxiety and Depression Association of America: www.adaa.org
- American Psychiatric Association: www.psychiatry.org
- Freedom From Fear: www.freedomfromfear.org

Content on this page was adapted from material found on the website for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): www.cdc.gov

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