



# Coping with a Traumatic Event

## What Is a Traumatic Event?

Most everyone has been through a stressful event in his or her life. When the event, or series of events, causes a lot of stress, it is called a traumatic event. Traumatic events 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.

## What Are Some Common Responses?

A person's response to a traumatic event may vary. Responses include 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 (PTSD).

## What Is PTSD?

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

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



## What Can You Do for Yourself?

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 person for support, and 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.

## What Can You Do for 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 Should You Contact Your Doctor or Mental Health Professional?

About half of those with PTSD recover within three months without treatment. Sometimes symptoms do not go away on their own 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 are severe enough during the first month to interfere a lot with your family, friends, and 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 for help and information

**American Red Cross** focuses on meeting people's immediate emergency needs after a disaster, such as shelter, food, and physical and mental health services. They also feed emergency workers, handle inquiries from concerned family members outside the disaster area, provide blood and blood products to disaster victims, and help those affected connect with other resources.

<http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster>

**Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA)** informs the public, healthcare professionals and legislators that anxiety disorders are real, serious and treatable. The ADAA promotes early diagnosis and treatment of anxiety disorders, and works to improve the lives of the people who suffer from them.

<http://www.adaa.org/index.cfm>

**National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (NCPTSD)** is part of the Department of Veterans Affairs. They work to improve the clinical care and social welfare of America's veterans through research, education, and training in the science, diagnosis, and treatment of PTSD and stress-related disorders. NCPTSD works with many different agencies and groups including veterans and their families, government policymakers, scientists and researchers, doctors and psychiatrists, journalists, and the public. This website is provided as an educational resource concerning PTSD and other consequences of traumatic stress. <http://www.ncptsd.org/>

**National Institute on Mental Health (NIMH)** is part of the of the U.S. government's National Institutes of Health. NIMH is responsible for research on mental health and mental disorders, including research on the mental health consequences of and interventions after disasters and acts of mass violence.

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/>

**Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Alliance** is an alliance of professional and advocacy organizations that provide educational resources to individuals diagnosed with PTSD and their loved ones; those at risk for developing PTSD; and medical, healthcare and other professionals.

<http://www.ptsdalliance.org/> (877) 507-PTSD

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency (SAMHSA)** is the lead mental health services agency of the Department of Health and Human Services. SAMHSA help assess assessing mental health needs and mental health training for disaster workers. SAMHSA also help arrange training for mental health outreach workers, assesses the content of applications for federal crisis counseling grant funds, and addresses worker stress issues and needs.