

Managing Traumatic Stress and Recovering



Everyone reacts differently to trauma.

In some cases, there are no visible signs of physical injury, but there is a serious emotional toll. It is common for people who have experienced traumatic situations to have strong emotional reactions. Understanding normal responses to these events can help in coping with your feelings, thoughts and behaviors, and help you to recover.

What Happens Afterwards?

Shock and denial are typical responses to trauma and disaster, especially shortly after the event. Both shock and denial are normal protective reactions.

Shock is a sudden and intense disturbance of your emotional state that may leave you feeling stunned or dazed. Denial involves your not acknowledging that something very stressful has actually happened, or not experiencing fully the intensity of the event. You may temporarily feel numb or disconnected. As the initial shock subsides, reactions vary from one person to another. The following, however, are normal responses to a traumatic event:

Feelings become intense and sometimes are unpredictable.

You may become more irritable than usual, and your mood may change back and forth. You might be especially anxious or nervous, or even become depressed.

Thoughts and behavior patterns are affected by the trauma.

You might have repeated and vivid memories of the event. These flashbacks may occur for no apparent reason and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating. You may find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions, or become more easily confused.

Interpersonal relationships often become strained. Greater conflict, such as more frequent arguments with family members and coworkers, is common. On the other hand, you might become withdrawn and isolated and avoid your usual activities.

Physical symptoms may accompany the extreme stress. For example, headaches, nausea and chest pain may result and may require medical attention. Preexisting medical conditions may worsen due to the stress. Regular sleeping and eating patterns may also be disrupted.

When Should I Seek Help?

Some people are able to cope effectively with the emotional and physical demands brought about by traumatic events by using their own support systems. It is not unusual, however, to find that serious problems persist and continue to interfere with daily living. For example, some may feel overwhelming nervousness or lingering sadness that adversely affects job performance and interpersonal relationships.

Individuals with prolonged reactions that disrupt their daily functioning should consult with a trained and experienced mental health professional. Psychologists and other mental health providers help educate people about normal responses to extreme stress. These professionals work with individuals affected by trauma to help them find constructive ways of dealing with the emotional impact.

With children, continued emotional outbursts and aggressive behavior, serious problems at school, preoccupation with the traumatic event, continued and extreme withdrawal and other signs of intense anxiety or emotional difficulties all point to the need for professional assistance. A qualified mental health professional can help children and their parents understand and deal with thoughts, feelings and behaviors that result from trauma.

More Tips

- Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have experienced. Try to be patient with changes in your emotional state.
- Establish or re-establish routines such as eating meals at regular times, following an exercise program and pursuing hobbies or other enjoyable activities.
- Avoid major life decisions, such as switching careers if possible, because these activities tend to be highly stressful.
- Get plenty of rest and eat well balanced meals.
- Avoid using alcohol and drugs as a means of coping.

