

FAQ: Traumatic events

What is a traumatic event?

Most all of us have been through a stressful event in our 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, injury or the threat of injury or death.

Traumatic events affect survivors, rescue workers and the friends and relatives of victims who have been involved. These events may also have an impact on people who have seen the event – either firsthand or on television.

What are some common responses to a traumatic event?

A person's response to a traumatic event may vary. Responses include feelings of fear, grief or 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 you 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, you may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, or 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 thoughts and feelings, drug abuse, feelings of being estranged and isolated, and not being able to complete daily tasks.

What can I do for myself?

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

- Understand that your symptoms may be normal, especially right after the event.
- Try to keep to your usual routine.
- Don't 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 others for support
- 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 I do for my child?

- Let your child know that it's 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 as quickly as possible

When should I contact a 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 or psychological problems before the event.

You may need to seek 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.