

WHEN YOU EXPERIENCE A TRAUMATIC EVENT

Was It a Traumatic Event?

If you were threatened with death or bodily harm, or witnessed the death or bodily harm of another person, or at least the threat of it, you have experienced a traumatic event. Emergency workers also call these “critical incidents.” They produce traumatic stress.

Traumatic Stress Symptoms

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. were traumatic events that produced enormous stress for millions of people. Many people suffered psychological effects from the attacks for months, even those who were not nearby.

Common stress reactions to traumatic events include changes in appetite and digestive problems, difficulty sleeping, headaches, anger, hyper-vigilance, suspicion, depression, crying spells, feelings of powerlessness, feeling overwhelmed, moodiness and irritability, anxiety about the future, loss of concentration, worry, withdrawal from others, nightmares, and more.

Managing Traumatic Stress

Just like a physical injury that should receive treatment, studies show that traumatic stress should be managed to prevent harmful effects on health and well-being. If stress symptoms emerge or linger after a traumatic event, and you deny their existence or minimize their importance, you increase the risk of an acute stress reaction and a stress induced illness.

PTSD: The Stress Illness

Fortunately, most people recover from traumatic stress symptoms, but some do not. These people may incur Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a debilitating illness that follows a traumatic event. It is diagnosed when traumatic stress symptoms persist for more than one month after the event. PTSD can adversely affect your personal life and job functioning.

PTSD: The Symptoms

The following are some of the key symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

If you exhibit any of these symptoms, it is important to seek treatment rather than tolerating symptoms that can interfere with your life. Untreated, some of these symptoms may linger for many years.

- 1) Unwanted or uncontrollable memories of the traumatic event that may include thoughts, sounds, smells, and images.
- 2) Disturbing dreams about the event.
- 3) Periodically feeling as though the traumatic event is still being experienced by re-living it in detail or having flashbacks.
- 4) Intense anxiety when you are reminded of the traumatic event by something unrelated directly to it.
- 5) Avoiding thoughts, feelings, or conversations with others who want to talk about the event.
- 6) Avoiding activities or persons that remind you of the traumatic event.
- 7) Lost memories concerning significant parts of the event.
- 8) Emotionally numb sensations—being unable to experience certain feelings, especially those associated with vulnerability such as love, or intimacy with a significant other.
- 9) Sleep problems.
- 10) Difficulty managing anger, and feeling more anger than a specific event should evoke.
- 11) Problems concentrating.
- 12) Often feeling “jumpy” or being easily startled.

Preventing PTSD

Avoiding PTSD is more likely when victims talk about their experience, especially with fellow victims. One-on-one counseling can also be helpful, but group work is especially effective. This is called a “critical incident stress debriefing (CISD).” Participate in such a group if it is offered. The assault on your brain by images and information from a traumatic event triggers the release of powerful brain chemicals that manage stress. This is normal, but a CISD helps prevent Posttraumatic Stress Disorder that can result from your brain’s response to trauma. A CISD will also help return you to a normal “pre-trauma” state more quickly.

Do’s and Don’ts

After a Traumatic Event, Do:

- Exercise to alleviate physical reactions.
- Talk about the event with others who care.
- Ask for help, if you need it.
- Try to keep on a normal schedule.
- Get plenty of rest. Drink plenty of fluids.
- Eat regular, well-balanced meals.

After a Traumatic Event, Don’t:

- Label your reactions as “crazy.”
- Make sudden, big life changes.
- Isolate or withdraw from others.
- Drink alcohol alleviate difficult feelings. (This disturbs restful sleep crucial to psychological recovery.)
- Tell yourself to “snap out of it.”
- “Thought-block” (forcing yourself not to think about the event.) Let memories occur naturally. They will pass.

What the EAP Can Do

The EAP can help you evaluate the effect of a traumatic event on your life and can offer suggestions about how to bounce back. Traumatic events may include accidents and close calls, natural disasters, sexual assault, past childhood sexual abuse, and many forms of victimization. The EAP can also discuss symptoms with you and provide more information about resources and counseling help.

