

Trauma and Recovery

If you've experienced a disaster or traumatic event, the days that follow can be emotionally difficult. You may feel overwhelmed by a full range of feelings. Don't be afraid to get help and talk to someone about what you're experiencing. Learn ways to manage your emotions and take control of your life.

After a traumatic event

The period that follows a traumatic situation or catastrophic incident is never easy. Such events typically leave emotional scars that take time to heal. During this time, it's normal to feel a range of emotions. It's important to acknowledge these feelings-to let them run their course and to give yourself time to properly grieve what has happened. This is part of the healing process. Some of the emotions you may experience include:

- Shock - you can't believe the event happened to you.
- Fear - the feeling that the event may happen again.
- Anger - rage against a higher power, perpetrator, or the circumstances that led up to the event. Feeling that the event was unfair: why did it happen to me?
- Shame - feeling that the event (especially a sexual abuse) has disgraced you or your family and has violated your innocence.
- Alienation - feeling rejected or misunderstood by others or that the event has made you different from others.
- Helplessness - a frustrating feeling of being powerless over the event.
- Guilt or blame - feeling that somehow you were responsible for what happened, or feeling guilty that you survived and others didn't.
- Mistrust - you may have unfounded doubts or mistrusts about others or similar situations.
- Sorrow - feeling incredibly sad that the event happened to you and possibly to others.

Most people respond to a traumatic event or situation through a series of coping stages. These stages vary in order and length from person to person.

1. The "outcry" stage. This stage usually occurs shortly after the trauma. The survivor can feel confused, dazed, anxious, and exhausted as she's trying to process the reality of the event.
2. The "denial" stage. As a defense mechanism, the survivor may try to hide from what happened, ignore her feelings, refuse to talk about what happened or the details of the event, or even shut down emotionally.
3. The "intrusion" stage. Memories and emotions may invade the survivor's consciousness as she struggles to come to grips with her loss. The survivor may experience mood changes and irritability, encounter difficulty concentrating, become sensitive to external stimuli, and encounter sleep disturbances.
4. The "working through" stage. The survivor has learned to accept what has happened and adopt strategies to help cope and heal.

Warning signs

Survivors of a traumatic event sometimes develop a condition clinically known as post-

traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can have a variety of symptoms. These symptoms tend to linger in those who don't seek treatment, and can seriously interfere with a person's ability to cope with the event. If you experience any of the following symptoms over a prolonged period of time, seek help:

- Recurring nightmares, flashbacks, or troubling thoughts about the event.
- Regularly being on edge, nervous, overly alert, or easily startled.
- Feelings of intense fear and anxiety, especially when exposed to situations, persons, or stimuli that remind you of the trauma.
- Feeling depressed, sad, and lethargic.
- Feelings of hopelessness, despair and futility.
- Difficulty focusing and concentrating, and a feeling of being "scattered."
- Sleep disturbances.
- Difficulty eating.
- Difficulty remembering details.
- Emotional detachment from others.

Tips for coping after a traumatic event

- Settle your situation. Remove yourself from an environment where there is the potential for further trauma or emotional duress.
- Reach out to others for support. Take comfort in the love and care of family and friends. Join a support group in your area for survivors of trauma.
- Find an expert you can trust. You should ultimately feel comfortable confiding in the therapist or counselor you choose.
- Take care of your body and your mind. Get plenty of rest. Take extra time off from work and other responsibilities. Eat right and exercise.
- Avoid unhealthy coping behaviors. Don't turn to drugs or alcohol to help you through this period. Find positive outlets and expressions, such as exercise, volunteer work, involvement in support groups, for your anxiety or stress.
- Find healing through writing. Many survivors find that keeping a journal and detailing their experiences through writing becomes a healthy, positive expression and coping technique. Try a daily gratitude journal, in which you jot down everything you feel grateful for that day. It will take time to readjust and "get back to normal" after a traumatic event. Be patient during this period, and don't try to rush the healing process. There may be setbacks and emotional relapses along the journey. Don't ignore your feelings or what you're experiencing. Be honest with yourself and others. Make a commitment to learn from your experiences and turn difficult events into positive life lessons.

Support resources

For help and more tips on how to cope with a trauma or disaster, consider contacting these organizations:

- Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA) 11900 Parklawn Drive, Suite 100 Rockville, MD 20852 Phone: 301-231-9350 www.adaa.org The ADAA "promotes the prevention and cure of anxiety disorders and works to improve the lives of all people who suffer from them."

- American Psychiatric Association 1400 K Street NW Washington, DC 20005
Phone: (888) 357-7924 Fax: 202-682-6220 www.psych.org The American Psychiatric Association is the premiere affiliation and advocacy group for psychiatrists and psychiatric patients.
- Freedom From Fear (FFF) 308 Seaview Ave. Staten Island, New York 10305
USA Phone: (718) 351-1717 Fax: (718) 667-8893 www.freedomfromfear.org The mission of FFF is to aid and counsel individuals and their families suffering from anxiety and depressive illnesses.
- www.ptsd.com offers information about PTSD referrals to support resources.

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