



Coping with Traumatic Events

Overview

A traumatic event is a shocking, scary, or dangerous experience that affects someone emotionally. These situations may be natural, like a tornado or earthquake. They can also be caused by other people, like a car accident, crime, or terror attack.

How individuals respond to traumatic events is an important area of research for the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH). Researchers are exploring the factors that help people cope as well as the factors that increase their risk for problems following the event.

Warning Signs

There are many different responses to potentially traumatic events. Most people have intense responses immediately following, and often for several weeks or even months after, a traumatic event. These responses can include:

- Feeling anxious, sad, or angry
- Trouble concentrating and sleeping
- Continually thinking about what happened

For most people, these are normal and expected responses and generally lessen with time. Healthy ways of coping in this time period include avoiding alcohol and other drugs, spending time with loved ones and trusted friends who are supportive, trying to maintain normal routines for meals, exercise, and sleep. In general, staying active is a good way to cope with stressful feelings.

However, in some cases, the stressful thoughts and feelings after a trauma continue for a long time and interfere with everyday life. For people who continue to feel the effects of the trauma, it is important to seek professional help. Some signs that an individual may need help include:

- Worrying a lot or feeling very anxious, sad, or fearful
- Crying often
- Having trouble thinking clearly
- Having frightening thoughts, reliving the experience
- Feeling angry
- Having nightmares or difficulty sleeping
- Avoiding places or people that bring back disturbing memories and responses.

Physical responses to trauma may also mean that an individual needs help. Physical symptoms may include:

- Headaches
- Stomach pain and digestive issues
- Feeling tired
- Racing heart and sweating
- Being very jumpy and easily startled

Those who already had mental health problems or who have had traumatic experiences in the past, who are faced with ongoing stress, or who lack support from friends and family may be more likely to develop stronger symptoms and need additional help. Some people turn to alcohol or other drugs to cope with their symptoms. Although substance use can temporarily cover up symptoms, it can also make life more difficult.

Mental health problems can be treated. If you or someone you know needs help, talk with your health care provider. If you are unsure where to go for help [visit NIMH's Help for Mental Illness](#) webpage.

Free Brochures and Factsheets

- [Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters: What Parents Can Do](#)
- [Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters: What Community Members Can Do](#)
- [Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters: What Rescue Workers Can Do](#)
- [More](#)

Multimedia

- [Dr. Sandro Galea talks about disasters and mental health research](#) (2011)
- [Dr. Robert Heinssen and Dr. Farris Tuma talk about traumatic stress in the military](#) (2009)

Health Hotlines

- [Disaster Distress Helpline](#): People affected by any disaster or tragedy can call the Disaster Distress Helpline to receive immediate counseling. Calling 1-800-985-5990 or texting **TalkWithUs** to **66746** will connect you to a trained professional from the closest crisis counseling center within the network. The hotline is sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).
- [Crisis Text Line](#): help is available 24 hours a day throughout the US by texting START to 741741
- [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#): If you or someone you know is in a crisis, get help immediately. You can call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Line at **1-800-273-TALK (8255)**. The lifeline is a free 24-hour, confidential suicide prevention hotline available to anyone in crisis or emotional distress. By calling the hotline number, you'll be connected to a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area 24/7.
- [Veterans Chat](#) (confidential), **text to 838255** (part of the [Veterans Crisis Line](#))

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