



# Healing From Trauma

Life dishes out some doozies, and sometimes moving on emotionally feels impossible. But science is learning more about how the body and brain are affected by shocking, life-changing events—and how we can finally leave the past behind.

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**A**my Orr was watching TV with her husband one night when she felt a stabbing pain in her upper abdomen that dropped her to the floor. She initially thought it was food poisoning (she'd just eaten a heavy meal). But when it hadn't gone away after a few days, her husband took her to the ER, where doctors struggled to diagnose the problem. They suspected gallstones, but tests were inconclusive, so they gave her pain meds and sent her on her way. The pain vanished that night, but it showed up again and again for months, especially after Amy ate. She wound up at the ER dozens of times more, and nobody—not even her gastroenterologist, who ran some tests—could detect the reason. Over time, she lost more than 70 pounds and so much muscle she could barely walk.

“I was crying all the time, because it was debilitating in every way: physically, mentally, and emotionally,” recalls Amy, a 35-year-old editor in Waterloo, Canada. “I was so afraid it would never go away, that I would just have this crushing pain for the rest of my life. And it was especially upsetting to feel like my doctors didn't care.” After a year of torment, another set of physicians finally diagnosed the infected gall-bladder others had missed. Amy had surgery, and the pain disappeared.

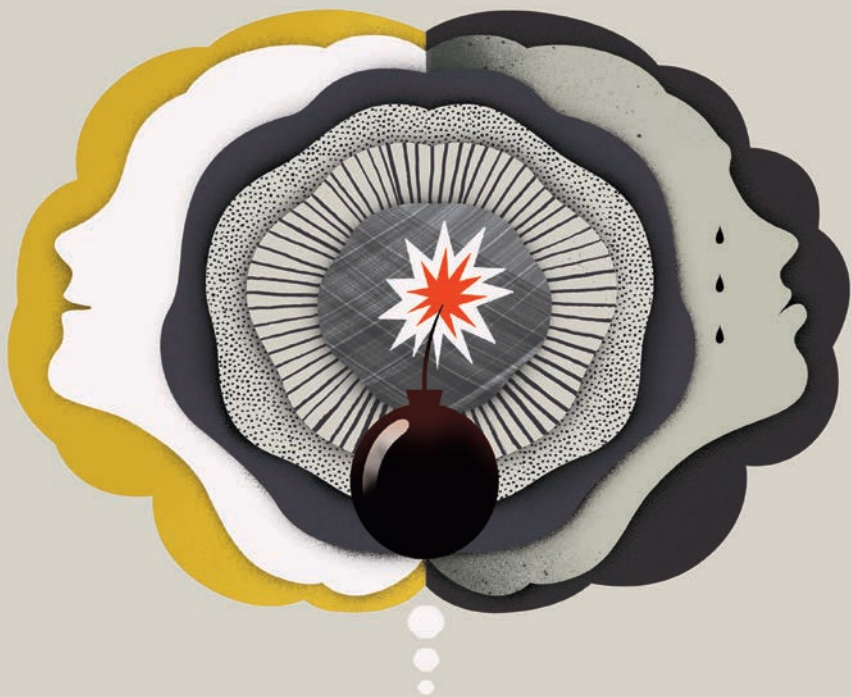
But Amy's story was just beginning, because a new kind of anguish soon followed. She frequently had nightmares about being stuck in situations

in which she was being hurt in ways she could not control, then awoke screaming and gasping for breath. Amy became obsessive about controlling her diet, sleep, and exercise to ward off even the idea of pain. And any ache—even something as minor as a paper cut—launched her into a shaking, hyperventilating panic attack. “When I mildly burned my hand on the stove, my husband had to stop me from calling an ambulance, as I thought the pain from my hand meant the abdominal pain had come back and I was going to die,” Amy says. “My reactions were irrational.”

When she mentioned this to the therapist she'd been seeing, the woman told Amy she was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. “I thought, *No, that's very dramatic. You only get that from being in war or being violently attacked*,” Amy says. But as her emotional issues intensified, she realized she could indeed trace them to her year of pain and anxiety. Over time, talking with her therapist, becoming aware of her PTSD symptoms, and relearning how her body functioned helped her get back to normal.

## WHEN HARDSHIP KEEPS HURTING

Trauma has always been part of the human condition, but these days it seems more common. Between mass shootings, horrific hurricanes and floods, and the #MeToo movement that brought sexual assault to the fore, we're seeing firsthand the effects that intense,



emotionally laden experiences can have long after they're over. Many experts believe the COVID-19 pandemic will have a far-reaching and lasting traumatic effect as well.

Those who study the phenomenon are clear that trauma can be brought on by many experiences other than military combat or an assault on a darkened street. Any watershed event—or series of events—that leads you to view your life in terms of “before” and “after” can cause severe mental-health effects, says Rachel Yehuda, Ph.D., a professor of psychiatry and neuroscience at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.

And something like that is likely to happen to each of us at some point, says James Gordon, M.D., founder and executive director of the Center for Mind-Body Medicine and a clinical professor of psychiatry and family medicine at Georgetown Medical School. Dr. Gordon, with his team, has trained thousands of professionals to work with trauma victims worldwide. “Being in a stressful or abusive relationship or work environment is traumatic. So is losing someone you love, having a serious illness, or facing discrimination,” he says. “Sometimes you move through a trauma with no residue, but other times your reactions continue long after the threat is over.”

## YOUR BRAIN ON TRAUMA

A key way those reactions manifest is through PTSD. While the official bible of psychiatry, known as the *DSM-5*, limits the diagnosis of PTSD to people exposed to serious injury, a threatened death (or the witnessing of an actual death), or sexual violence, Dr. Gordon considers this list way too narrow. You don't need to experience physical harm or the most extreme emotional shock to develop post-traumatic stress, he says. And treating the condition is possible only if those suffering silently know to seek help.

Not doing so can have grave consequences. Years ago, people who faced even the most harrowing emotional or physical shocks were expected to "get over it" by stuffing the experience away. Soldiers came back from war and never talked about what they had seen. Women who'd delivered stillborn infants were advised to quickly have another child. Now there's a growing realization that to properly recover, you must allow both your mind and your body to process what happened

and accept that in some ways you may be changed by it forever, Yehuda says.

The aftereffects of trauma can be immediate, with symptoms like anxiety, nightmares, insomnia, and/or depression. But not being properly treated can set you up for chronic physical diseases as well. A study in *JAMA Internal Medicine*, for example, found that women whose first sexual experience was being raped were more likely to suffer from endometriosis and pelvic inflammatory disease later in life than





other women. Dr. Gordon, author of *The Transformation: A Comprehensive, Step-by-Step Guide to Healing Psychological Trauma*, has seen trauma survivors develop digestive problems, autoimmune disorders, and heart disease they might not have gotten otherwise. Plus, people who live through a traumatically distressing ordeal are more likely to abuse drugs or alcohol, suffer from an eating disorder, or even die by suicide.

## YOUR BODY ON TRAUMA

All this happens because trauma has a powerful impact on the nervous system. We're all familiar with the fight-or-flight response, the chemical and physiological reactions to stress that help us either battle or bolt from an enemy. A traumatic event ramps up this effect to the extreme. Later, as you recall the situation, or if there are ongoing incidents (e.g., seeing an abusive boss every day, living with a violent partner), the body continually revs back up, which can lead to inflammation and other damage to both it and the mind.

Experts also now understand that when fighting or fleeing are not options, another is to freeze. Picture a mouse who bolted away from a cat but now is caught in its jaws. The freeze response produces pain-numbing endorphins and helps the animal (and us humans) psychologically detach from the terror at hand. This is why people in horrific situations sometimes “leave their

bodies,” or dissociate, for a period. Those who suffer from PTSD might freeze or even dissociate when reminded of a traumatic episode years later.

When excessive fight-or-flight (or, especially, freeze) reactions are triggered during an initial trauma, Dr. Gordon explains, a person's memory isn't laid down in the brain in the usual logical way. Instead, fragments of emotions, sounds, images, thoughts, and physical sensations are input piecemeal. This is why a woman describing a sexual assault even decades later may not remember what she was doing moments before she was attacked, but can describe in precise detail the pitch of her assailant's voice or how his breath smelled, says Dr. Gordon. And it's the reason coming across a similar sensation, as Amy did any time she felt even minor pain after her trauma, can cause the brain to trigger an outsize reaction.

In some cases, traumatic events can be so overwhelming that the mind might actually suppress them so a person doesn't even remember that they occurred. In his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, psychiatrist Bessel van der Kolk, M.D., founder and medical director of the Trauma Center in Brookline, MA, notes that such protective amnesia has been documented in many cases and likely explains why so many adults suddenly recalled being abused by priests as children after the church scandal went public.

## CAN'T REMEMBER, CAN'T FORGET

Rachel (last name withheld), a yoga instructor in her 50s, experienced this kind of repressed memory. Throughout her life, Rachel had occasionally felt depressed, though she kept telling herself her life was good—she had a loving husband, two children, and a job she adored. Rachel also frequently felt insecure and irrationally unconfident about her body and had difficulty trusting people. Two years ago, after she inexplicably burst into tears in a doctor's office, she decided it was time to see a therapist.

That was when Rachel began to recall how her mother had raged at her without warning, screamed at or struck her, and regularly called her a failure and a disappointment. "It's so taboo to think badly about your mother, so I didn't," Rachel says. Over time, working with the therapist and writing down her story to take possession of it, she was able to release her depression and self-doubt.

Childhood trauma like Rachel's is especially damaging, says Shari Botwin, a licensed clinical social worker in Cherry Hill, NJ, and the author of *Thriving After Trauma*. "A child can't process emotions the same way an adult can. Plus, children often feel shame or fear because they wrongly blame themselves for what happened," she says.

Even adults who know they are not at fault can be overwhelmed by trauma. When Robin Wilson, 50, an interior designer and an entrepreneur, fled an

abusive marriage five years ago, she thought she had put her troubles behind her. But her ex continued to harass her. Over the next few years, Robin developed stress rashes, digestive issues, and headaches, and her weight yo-yoed by 50 pounds. After she saw multiple doctors for physical symptoms, one directed her to an expert on veterans who diagnosed complex PTSD, a type of PTSD caused by living through a series of traumatic events or a prolonged episode as opposed to a single one. "I started crying, because I knew he was right. It all started to make sense," says Robin.

Robin's recovery involved learning to dial down her heightened stress response and release the trauma stored in her body. With her doctor's guidance, she practiced yoga, played tennis, walked a lot, and started massage, acupuncture, and chiropractic sessions. Occasionally she has flashbacks, palpitations, and intense emotions, as happened recently when she heard a man using a familiar nasty tone toward his wife. But she feels the worst is over. "More people who experience domestic violence should be treated for PTSD, but they are ashamed to admit their situation, as I was," Robin says.

## A STRONGER FUTURE

While no one would seek out trauma, the idea of a silver lining isn't just a cliché; you may in fact come out the other side more resilient. Tina Collins, a 54-year-old Baltimore

resident, thought she'd already been through the worst life had to throw at her: She was diagnosed with psychosis in early adulthood and later found herself overwhelmed by providing years of full-time care for her elderly, disabled parents. She persevered,

only to have to flee her burning house with her husband two years ago—the home was destroyed. But Tina found herself drawing on lessons from her past. “You learn that after a trauma you have to focus only on what’s right in front of you one hour at a time, and





to give yourself permission to fully feel all your emotions,” she says. She did have symptoms of PTSD—difficulty sleeping, bouts of random sobbing, and jumping at sounds that reminded

her of the metal and glass she’d heard cracking around her—but they faded. After overcoming trauma, she says, “you feel like, *I survived that, so I can handle anything that comes my way.*”

## TREATMENTS FOR TRAUMA

### ➔ TRY A TRAUMA-SPECIFIC THERAPY

Certain techniques may directly loosen trapped memories and emotions. These include Prolonged Exposure, in which you reexperience the trauma as a therapist guides you to stay grounded; Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), during which a therapist uses one of various techniques to help you safely process traumatic memories; and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), an eight-week program that teaches you to focus on the here and now rather than ruminating on the past or the future.

### ➔ SIT IN SILENCE

Meditation may blunt your fight-or-flight reaction, help you think clearly, and rebuild brain connections ruptured by trauma. “The

vast majority of people who do it for just 10 minutes notice a change right away,” Dr. Gordon says.

### ➔ SHAKE AND DANCE

If you’ve ever seen ducks shake out their feathers after they fight, you know that nature intends us to purge physical residue before trauma lodges in our cells. Some experts suggest yoga or walking; Dr. Gordon prefers a technique he created in which you vigorously shake your whole body for five minutes, stop and notice the stillness for the next three, then dance to your favorite tunes for another five. This is part of a comprehensive program detailed in *The Transformation*; the intervention was shown in a major study in the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* to substantially lessen PTSD symptoms in Serbian war survivors.

### ➔ DIETARY CHANGES

Chemicals your body produces during a harrowing event can damage the villi in your intestines and alter the bacteria that keep your gut healthy, says Dr. Gordon. This may be why irritable bowel syndrome is a common symptom of PTSD. You’ll want to move away from the sweet, creamy comfort foods you might crave and lean on healing proteins, vegetables, and fruits.

### ➔ SEEK SUPPORT

Loneliness and isolation give trauma extra power, so find a support group (online or in person), and reach out to friends and acquaintances who have been through something big. “A healing community that surrounds someone after a traumatic experience can be important to helping them feel nurtured and secure,” says Yehuda.