

Emotional Recovery Information and Guidelines

Get professional help. Find a therapist who understands trauma and dysfunctional family issues. Consult with a psychiatrist about managing severe or persistent symptoms including insomnia; depression; anxiety or panic; or dissociation (feeling numb, disconnected from oneself; gaps in memory; episodes of regression). If you feel suicidal or otherwise unable to keep yourself safe, you can always go to your nearest hospital emergency room or call 911.

Mobilize your support system. Involve your partner and close friends/family in your recovery to whatever degree you feel comfortable doing so. Share your feelings and speak up if you are in crisis! Consider inviting your partner into some therapy sessions so they can learn the best ways to support you in your recovery. If he or she is having trouble coping with your trauma-related symptoms, they might need to get their own counseling support.

Focus on basic self-care. Eat three meals per day or the equivalent; get at least eight hours of sleep per night; and try to get some physical activity each day – even just a 15-minute walk. Persisting sleep and appetite disturbances (in either direction, too much or too little) are usually related to depression or severe anxiety, and should be discussed with a psychiatrist as noted above. See your primary care physician about stress-related physical symptoms, e.g., headaches, gastrointestinal problems, muscle pain and tension, or any ongoing medical issue that is exacerbated by stress.

Give attention to your emotional needs. Try to get more in touch with your feelings and give yourself the validation you did not get while growing up. (Writing or drawing can be helpful in expressing feelings too.) Think of yourself as having a sad, scared child inside who needs your love and attention. If you are giving yourself a lot of negative messages, start replacing them with more realistic thoughts, e.g., “No need to be perfect.”

Minimize your exposure to traumatic stimuli – Obviously, you should avoid situations where someone’s anger is getting out of control and there is yelling, property destruction or physical aggression. (If you live in a home where this is going on, contact your county’s abused persons program for help.) It is also not good for to watch violent movies or TV programs, gruesome events in the news, sports like boxing where people are getting brutalized.... People with trauma histories are often stuck in “fight or flight mode,” and exposure to more violence/aggression keeps them feeling activated and unsafe.

If there is alcoholism or untreated mental illness in your family, read about how these dynamics might have affected you, and consider a support group. It can be helpful to get some distance from relatives who are still drinking or behaving destructively, but you don’t have to confront anyone or make an abrupt decision to cut off contact! Just try to give yourself some space so that you can start getting clearer about the ways in which you have been affected by these family problems.

Don’t make major, irreversible decisions in the early phases of recovery unless there is some clear threat to your safety or well-being. Try to keep up your routines while scaling back certain demands and responsibilities. Emotional recovery takes a lot of energy, and it might be a while before you start to feel the beneficial effects. But if you get the right support and stay focused on taking care of yourself, you can’t help but get better....