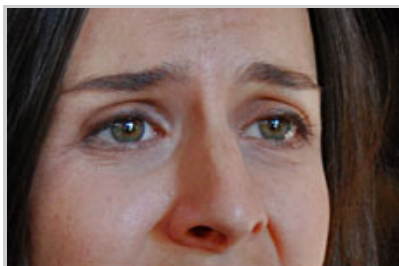


Emotional and Psychological Trauma

Symptoms, Treatment, and Recovery

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If you've gone through a traumatic experience, you may be struggling with upsetting emotions, frightening memories, or a sense of constant danger. Or you may feel numb, disconnected, and unable to trust other people. When bad things happen, it can

take a while to get over the pain and feel safe again. But with the right treatment, self-help strategies, and support, you can speed your recovery. Whether the traumatic event happened years ago or yesterday, you can heal and move on.

IN THIS ARTICLE:

- [Emotional or psychological trauma](#)
- [Trauma risk factors](#)
- [Symptoms of trauma](#)
- [When to seek professional help](#)
- [Finding a trauma specialist](#)
- [Treatment for trauma](#)
- [Trauma recovery tips](#)

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What is emotional and psychological trauma?

Emotional and psychological trauma is the result of extraordinarily stressful events that shatter your sense of security, making you feel helpless and vulnerable in a dangerous world.

Traumatic experiences often involve a threat to life or safety, but **any situation that leaves you feeling overwhelmed and alone can be traumatic, even if it doesn't involve physical harm.** It's not the objective facts that determine whether an event is traumatic, but your *subjective emotional experience* of the event. The more frightened and helpless you feel, the more likely you are to be traumatized.

Causes of emotional or psychological trauma

An event will most likely lead to emotional or psychological trauma if:

- It happened unexpectedly.
- You were unprepared for it.
- You felt powerless to prevent it.
- It happened repeatedly.
- Someone was intentionally cruel.
- It happened in childhood.

Emotional and psychological trauma can be caused by single-blow, one-time events, such as a horrible accident, a natural disaster, or a violent attack. Trauma can also stem from ongoing, relentless stress, such as living in a crime-ridden neighborhood or struggling with cancer.

Commonly overlooked causes of emotional and psychological trauma

- Falls or sports injuries
- Surgery (especially in the first 3 years of life)
- The sudden death of someone close
- A car accident
- The breakup of a significant relationship
- A humiliating or deeply disappointing experience
- The discovery of a life-threatening illness or disabling condition

Risk factors that increase your vulnerability to trauma

Not all potentially traumatic events lead to lasting emotional and psychological damage. Some people rebound quickly from even the most tragic and shocking experiences. Others are devastated by experiences that, on the surface, appear to be less upsetting.

A number of risk factors make people susceptible to emotional and psychological trauma. People are more likely to be traumatized by a stressful experience if they're already under a heavy stress load or have recently suffered a series of losses.

People are also more likely to be traumatized by a new situation if they've been traumatized before – especially if the earlier trauma occurred in childhood.

Childhood trauma increases the risk of future trauma

Experiencing trauma in childhood can have a severe and long-lasting effect. Children who have been traumatized see the world as a frightening and dangerous place. When childhood trauma is not resolved, this fundamental sense of fear and helplessness carries over into adulthood, setting the stage for further trauma.

Learn about the role of early life trauma



Watch 22-min. video: [Creating Secure Attachment](#)

Childhood trauma results from anything that disrupts a child's sense of safety and security, including:

- An unstable or unsafe environment
- Separation from a parent
- Serious illness
- Intrusive medical procedures
- Sexual, physical, or verbal abuse
- Domestic violence
- Neglect
- Bullying

Symptoms of emotional and psychological trauma

Following a traumatic event, or repeated trauma, people react in different ways, experiencing a wide range of physical and emotional reactions. There is no "right" or "wrong" way to think, feel, or respond to trauma, so don't judge your own reactions or those of other people. **Your responses are NORMAL reactions to ABNORMAL events.**

Emotional and psychological symptoms of trauma:

- Shock, denial, or disbelief
- Anger, irritability, mood swings
- Guilt, shame, self-blame
- Feeling sad or hopeless
- Confusion, difficulty concentrating
- Anxiety and fear
- Withdrawing from others
- Feeling disconnected or numb

Physical symptoms of trauma:

- Insomnia or nightmares
- Being startled easily
- Racing heartbeat
- Aches and pains
- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating
- Edginess and agitation
- Muscle tension

These symptoms and feelings typically last from a few days to a few months, gradually fading as you process the trauma. But even when you're feeling better, you may be troubled from time to time by painful memories or emotions—especially in response to triggers such as an anniversary of the event or an image, sound, or situation that reminds you of the traumatic experience.

Grieving is normal following trauma

Whether or not a traumatic event involves death, survivors must cope with the loss, at least temporarily, of their sense of safety and security. The natural reaction to this loss is grief. Like people who have lost a loved one, trauma survivors go through a [grieving process](#). This process, while inherently painful, is easier if you turn to others for support, take care of yourself, and talk about how you feel.

When to seek professional help for emotional or psychological trauma

Recovering from a traumatic event takes time, and everyone heals at his or her own pace. But if months have passed and your symptoms aren't letting up, you may need professional help from a trauma expert.

Seek help for emotional or psychological trauma if you're:

- Having trouble functioning at home or work
- Suffering from severe fear, anxiety, or depression
- Unable to form close, satisfying relationships
- Experiencing terrifying memories, nightmares, or flashbacks
- Avoiding more and more things that remind you of the trauma
- Emotionally numb and disconnected from others
- Using alcohol or drugs to feel better

Finding a trauma specialist

Working through trauma can be scary, painful, and potentially retraumatizing. **Because of the risk of retraumatization, this healing work is best done with the help of an experienced trauma specialist.**

[Finding the right therapist](#) may take some time. It's very important that the therapist you choose has experience treating trauma. But the quality of the relationship with your therapist is equally important. Choose a trauma specialist you feel comfortable with. Trust your instincts. If you don't feel safe, respected, or understood, find another therapist. There should be a sense of trust and warmth between you and your trauma therapist.

After meeting a potential trauma therapist, ask yourself these questions:

- Did you feel comfortable discussing your problems with the therapist?
- Did you feel like the therapist understood what you were talking about?
- Were your concerns taken seriously or were they minimized or dismissed?
- Were you treated with compassion and respect?
- Do you believe that you could grow to trust the therapist?

Treatment for psychological and emotional trauma

In order to heal from psychological and emotional trauma, you must face and resolve the unbearable feelings and memories you've long avoided. Otherwise they will return again and again, unbidden and uncontrollable.

Trauma treatment and healing involves:

- Processing trauma-related memories and feelings
- Discharging pent-up "fight-or-flight" energy
- Learning how to regulate strong emotions
- Building or rebuilding the ability to trust other people

Trauma therapy treatment approaches

Trauma disrupts the body's natural equilibrium, freezing you in a state of hyperarousal and fear. In essence, your nervous system gets stuck in overdrive. Successful trauma treatment must address this imbalance and reestablish your physical sense of safety. The following therapies are commonly used in the treatment of emotional and psychological trauma:

- **Somatic experiencing** takes advantage of the body's unique ability to heal itself. The focus of therapy is on bodily sensations, rather than thoughts and memories about the traumatic event. By concentrating on what's happening in your body, you gradually get in touch with trauma-related energy and tension. From there, your natural survival instincts take over, safely releasing this pent-up energy through shaking, crying, and other forms of physical release.
- **EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing)** incorporates elements of cognitive-behavioral therapy with eye movements or other forms of rhythmic, left-right stimulation. These back-and-forth eye movements are thought to work by "unfreezing" traumatic memories, allowing you to resolve them.
- **Cognitive-behavioral therapy** helps you process and evaluate your thoughts and feelings about a trauma. While cognitive-behavioral therapy doesn't treat the physiological effects of trauma, it can be helpful when used in addition to a body-based therapy such as somatic experiencing or EMDR.

Emotional and psychological trauma recovery tips

Recovering from emotional and psychological trauma takes time. Give yourself time to heal and to mourn the losses you've experienced. Don't try to force the healing process. Be patient with the pace of recovery. Finally, be prepared for difficult and volatile emotions. Allow yourself to feel whatever you're feeling without judgment or guilt.

Trauma self-help strategy 1: Don't isolate

- **Following a trauma**, you may want to withdraw from others, but isolation makes things worse. Connecting to others will help you heal, so make an effort to maintain your relationships and avoid spending too much time alone.
- **Ask for support.** It's important to talk about your feelings and ask for the help you need. Turn to a trusted family member, friend, counselor, or clergyman.
- **Participate in social activities**, even if you don't feel like it. Do "normal" things with other people, things that have nothing to do with the traumatic experience. If you've retreated from relationships that were once important to you, make the effort to reconnect.
- **Join a support group for trauma survivors.** Being with others who are facing the same problems can help reduce your sense of isolation and hearing how others cope can help inspire you.
- **Volunteer.** As well as helping others, [volunteering](#) can be a great way to challenge the sense of helplessness that often accompanies trauma. Remind yourself of your strengths and reclaim your sense of power by comforting or helping others.

Trauma self-help strategy 2: Stay grounded

In order to stay grounded after a trauma, it helps to have a structured schedule to follow.

- **Stick to a daily routine**, with regular times for waking, sleeping, eating, working, and exercise. Make sure to schedule time for relaxing and social activities, too.
- **Break large jobs into smaller, manageable tasks.** Take pleasure from the accomplishment of achieving something, even it's a small thing.
- **Find activities that make you feel better** and keep your mind occupied (reading, taking a class, cooking, playing with your kids or pets), so you're not dedicating all your energy and attention to focusing on the traumatic experience.

- **Allow yourself to feel what you feel when you feel it.** Acknowledge your feelings about the trauma as they arise and accept them. Accepting your feelings is part of the grieving process and is necessary for healing.

Staying grounded: A trauma self-help exercise

If you are feeling disoriented, confused, or upset, you can do the following exercise:

- Sit on a chair. Feel your feet on the ground. Press on your thighs. Feel your behind on the seat and your back against the chair.
- Look around you and pick six objects that have red or blue. This should allow you to feel in the present, more grounded, and in your body. Notice how your breath gets deeper and calmer.
- You may want to go outdoors and find a peaceful place to sit on the grass. As you do, feel how your body can be held and supported by the ground.

Trauma self-help strategy 3: Take care of your health

A healthy body increases your ability to cope with stress from a trauma.

- **Get plenty of sleep.** After a traumatic experience, worry or fear may disturb your sleep patterns. A lack of sleep can make your trauma symptoms worse and make it harder to maintain your emotional balance. Go to sleep and get up at the same time each day and aim for 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night.
- **Avoid alcohol and drugs** as their use can worsen your trauma symptoms and exacerbate feelings of depression, anxiety, and isolation.
- **Exercise regularly.** Regular exercise boosts serotonin, endorphins, and other feel-good brain chemicals. It also boosts self-esteem and helps to improve sleep. For maximum results, aim for 30 to 60 minutes of activity on most days.
- **Eat a well-balanced diet.** Eating small, well-balanced meals throughout the day will help you keep your energy up and minimize mood swings. While you may be drawn to sugary foods for the quick boost they provide, complex carbohydrates are a better choice. Foods rich in certain omega-3 fats—such as salmon, walnuts, soybeans, and flaxseeds—can give your mood a boost.
- **Reduce stress.** Making time for rest and relaxation will help you bring your life back into balance. Try [relaxation techniques](#) such as meditation, yoga, or deep breathing exercises. Schedule time for activities that bring you joy—favorite hobbies or activities with friends, for example.

Helping someone deal with emotional and psychological trauma

It can be difficult to know how to help a loved one who's suffered a traumatic or distressing experience, but your support can be a crucial factor in their recovery.

- **Be patient and understanding.** Healing from emotional or psychological trauma takes time. Be patient with the pace of recovery and remember that everyone's response to trauma is different. Don't judge your loved one's reaction against your own response or anyone else's.
- **Offer practical support** to help your loved one get back into a normal routine. That may mean help with collecting groceries or housework, for example, or simply being available to talk or listen.
- **Don't pressure your loved one into talking but be available when they want to talk.** Some trauma survivors find it difficult to talk about what happened. Don't force your loved one to open up but let them know you are there to listen whenever they feel ready.
- **Help your loved one to socialize and relax.** Encourage them to participate in physical exercise, seek out friends, and pursue hobbies and other activities that bring them pleasure.

Take a fitness class together or set a regular lunch date with friends.

- **Don't take the trauma symptoms personally.** Your loved one may become angry, irritable, withdrawn, or emotionally distant. Remember that this is a result of the trauma and may not have anything to do with you or your relationship.

Helping a child recover from trauma

It's important to communicate openly with children following trauma. Let them know that it's normal to feel scared or upset. Your child may also look to you for cues on how they should respond to traumatic events so let him or her see you dealing with symptoms of trauma in a positive way.

How children react to emotional and psychological trauma

Some common reactions to trauma and ways to help your child deal with them:

- **Regression.** Many children may try to return to an earlier stage when they felt safer and more cared for. Younger children may wet the bed or want a bottle; older children may fear being alone. It's important to be patient and comforting if your child responds this way.
- **Thinking the event is their fault.** Children younger than seven or eight tend to think that if something goes wrong, it must be their fault—no matter how irrational this may sound to an adult. Be sure your child understands that he did not cause the event.
- **Sleep disorders.** Some children have difficulty falling to sleep; others wake frequently or have troubling dreams. If you can, give your child a stuffed animal, soft blanket, or flashlight to take to bed. Try spending extra time together in the evening, doing quiet activities or reading. Be patient. It may take a while before your child can sleep through the night again.
- **Feeling helpless.** Being active in a campaign to prevent an event like this one from happening again, writing thank you letters to people who have helped, and caring for others can bring a sense of hope and control to everyone in the family.

Source: *Sidran Institute*

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Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) – Caused by a traumatic or terrifying past experience, PTSD symptoms include flashbacks, nightmares, or constant fear.

Coping with Grief and Loss – Getting past a trauma involves grieving your losses, whether they be loss of life or property or loss of your sense of safety.



Supporting a Grieving Person – Find tips for helping a trauma survivor through the grieving process and offering much-needed comfort and support.



Common Causes of Trauma



Domestic Violence and Abuse – Learn about the signs and symptoms of abusive relationships and the cycle of abuse.



Child Abuse & Neglect – Trauma from childhood can have deep, long-lasting effects. Learn about child abuse and neglect, and what you can do about it.



Attachment and Adult Relationships – Insecure attachment between a baby and its mother can be traumatic and have an impact on your adult relationships.

Emotional Self-Help Toolkit



When disasters happen, the experience of being helpless and overwhelmed can close us down emotionally leaving us feeling out of control and out of touch with ourselves and others. Helpguide's free [Bring Your Life Into Balance](#) Emotional Self-Help toolkit is a resource for learning skills that restore emotional balance.

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