



American Group

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What Every Person Should Know About Trauma

What is Trauma?

Everyone is affected by trauma or traumatic events during his or her lifetime. And our responses to these events – however moderate or severe – are often normal.

You may be wondering, "What is normal?" In cases of trauma, there is a whole range of normal reactions, including:

- A sense of terror or catastrophe
- Recognition of grave danger
- Enormous sadness
- A feeling of vulnerability or helplessness
- Outrage and anger
- Relief and guilt about surviving

Some people suffer initially from anxiety, intrusive recollections and difficulty sleeping. Others can't return to the activity they were doing when the incident occurred. On the other hand, some may act as if "nothing is wrong," and the only sign of a problem is that he or she may become uncommunicative or avoid social contact.

Grief is also part of the traumatic experience. Grief is a kind of "normal illness" whereby the body and mind heal from a loss. Therefore, a grieving person also may have transient symptoms like trouble concentrating and sleeping, memory problems, feeling as if life is meaningless or a general lack of enthusiasm for daily living.

Following exposure to trauma, many factors can re-arouse or "trigger" intense revivals of our initial reactions. These unexpected reminders lurk at the edge of our awareness and can prompt sudden emotional reactions. What's important to remember is that the vast majority of people, 80 to 90 percent, do not become significantly impaired or disabled by tragic experiences – even those whose lives are profoundly affected. Human beings are amazingly resilient. Most of us are able to resume normal lives even after the most painful tragedies.

Who's at Risk?

It's not always easy to know who's at risk for suffering more severe reactions to trauma. Generally those who are directly affected are most vulnerable, as are people who are already stressed, lack support systems, or have a history of prior trauma or emotional illness.

The symptoms of trauma among children are not always as clear. Children and adolescents often find it hard to ask for, and accept, help. Therefore, it's important that parents and teachers be sensitive to the child's needs and watch for any changes in functioning, such as sleeping patterns, eating behavior, studying and social activities. Parents should be respectful of the child's ways of dealing with trauma and allow him or her to verbalize feelings and express them in drawings and other "non-verbal" constructive activities. Help children understand they are safe and loved. Provide explanations that are simple to understand. Be a good listener and observer. Most children work through the circumstances just fine. In fact, studies show that even after a major traumatic event, most children, too, do not become seriously disabled.

How to Cope

People who have suffered a traumatic experience often feel "crazy" or abnormal. Trauma can affect the way we think, feel and behave. To help deal with these feelings, look for ways to restore and recover a sense of safety, trust, control and self-worth. Be willing to make use of available supports. There are many ways to relieve anxiety. Identify and use what works for you.

- Take care of yourself. Do things that will be soothing or comfortable to you to provide a "release." Exercising, writing in a journal, meditating, listening to music, and spending time with friends and family are just a few of the ways we can help restore a sense of normalcy.





- Pay attention to your own reactions and feelings; try to put your experiences into words.
- Don't try to downplay or minimize what's happened.
- Talk to people who have had similar experiences and seek their support.
- Avoid impulsive changes in your life.
- Give yourself time to grieve and to cry if necessary.
- Pay attention to such things as your diet, sugar, caffeine or nicotine intake, and alcohol or recreational drug use.
- Be willing to engage with other people.
- Take your time to heal.

What Communities Can Do

A community that has undergone a tragic event should come together to offer support in various ways. Providing education is useful. Memorial services, support groups, accurate information and a gradual re-building of shattered lives are very important. Making a range of professional services available is also helpful. Oklahoma City is an excellent example of a community that rallied around its survivors, the families and the grieving to promote a healing process.

Getting Help

In some instances when trauma is severe, it can result in persistent panic attacks, depression, substance abuse, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a condition that can last a brief time or become chronic. In PTSD, one can experience the repeated anxious reliving of a traumatic event over an extended period of time; people can experience vivid flashbacks or, conversely, they may try to avoid anything that reminds them of the event; or they may become irritable, have trouble sleeping or concentrating.

In considering professional assistance, these are some of the important questions to consider. Is the level of distress interfering with normal routines? Do you find yourself turning to "dysfunctional" ways of coping such as drug or alcohol abuse or violent or abusive behavior? Do these symptoms fade over time? Are you beginning to feel emotionally disabled?

A person suffering from severe trauma or depression should contact a mental health professional for an evaluation. Brief psychotherapy and/or medication may prove helpful. Research suggests that getting help soon after onset can limit or prevent future problems from arising.

When searching for a therapist, be sure the therapist is properly accredited and licensed and has had training in the treatment of trauma. Consider contacting a reputable mental health organization, medical center or professional society, such as the American Group Psychotherapy Association at 1-877-668-AGPA (2472), which certifies group psychotherapists through its National Registry of Certified Group Psychotherapists.

Group Psychotherapy - A Proven Treatment Option

Group therapy, a widely accepted treatment option for over 50 years, is extremely beneficial in treating trauma. Groups provide a safe, nurturing, accepting environment in which painful feelings and experiences can be shared. Groups allow people to speak the unspeakable. They encourage the reestablishment of trust, validate your experiences and provide access to information from others. They help rebuild self-esteem. Most importantly, through group therapy you discover you're not alone.