

# Coping with a Traumatic Event

## What is a traumatic event?

- Most everyone has been through a stressful event in his or her life. When the event, or series of events, causes a lot of stress, it is called a traumatic event.
- Traumatic events are marked by a sense of horror, helplessness, serious injury, or the threat of serious injury or death.
- Traumatic events affect survivors, rescue workers, and the friends and relatives of victims who have been involved.
- They may also have an impact on people who have seen the event either firsthand or on television.

## What are some common responses?

- A person's response to a traumatic event may vary. Responses include feelings of fear, grief and depression.
- Physical and behavioral responses include nausea, dizziness, and changes in appetite and sleep pattern as well as withdrawal from daily activities.
- Responses to trauma can last for weeks to months before people start to feel normal again.



Most people report feeling better within three months after a traumatic event.

If the problems become worse or last longer than one month after the event, the person may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

# What is PTSD?



- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an intense physical and emotional response to thoughts and reminders of the event that last for many weeks or months after the traumatic event.
- The symptoms of PTSD fall into three broad types: re-living, avoidance and increased arousal.

## Symptoms of re-living

- Symptoms of re-living include flashbacks, nightmares, and extreme emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the event.
- Emotional reactions can include feeling guilty, extreme fear of harm, and numbing of emotions.
- Physical reactions can include uncontrollable shaking, chills or heart palpitations, and tension headaches.

## Symptoms of avoidance

- Symptoms of avoidance include staying away from activities, places, thoughts, or feelings related to the trauma or feeling detached or estranged from others.

## Symptoms of increased arousal

- Symptoms of increased arousal include being overly alert or easily startled, difficulty sleeping, irritability or outbursts of anger, and lack of concentration.





Other symptoms linked with PTSD include: panic attacks, depression, suicidal thought and feelings, drug abuse, feelings of being estranged and isolated, and not being able to complete daily tasks.

# What can you do for yourself?

- There are many things you can do to cope with traumatic events:
  - Understand that your symptoms may be normal, especially right after the trauma.
  - Keep to your usual routine.
  - Take the time to resolve day-to-day conflicts so they do not add to your stress.
  - Do not shy away from situations, people and places that remind you of the trauma.
  - Find ways to relax and be kind to yourself.
  - Turn to family, friends, and clergy person for support, and talk about your experiences and feelings with them.
  - Participate in leisure and recreational activities.
  - Recognize that you cannot control everything.
  - Recognize the need for trained help, and call a local mental health center

## When Should You Contact Your Doctor or Mental Health Professional?

- About half of those with PTSD recover within three months without treatment. Sometimes symptoms do not go away on their own or they last for more than three months.
- This may happen because of the severity of the event, direct exposure to the traumatic event, seriousness of the threat to life, the number of times an event happened, a history of past trauma, and psychological problems before the event.
- You may need to consider seeking professional help if your symptoms are severe enough during the first month to interfere a lot with your family, friends, and job.
- If you suspect that you or someone you know has PTSD talk with a health care provider or call your local mental health clinic.

For more information on Coping with Trauma, please visit the Mental Health tab under Resources.