Coping with Emotional and Psychological Trauma

Dealing with Recent or Childhood Trauma So You Can Move On



If you’ve had an experience that’s left you feeling helpless and out of control, you may have been traumatized. Psychological trauma can leave you struggling with upsetting emotions, memories, and anxiety that won’t go away. You may also 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 trusting and safe again. But with the right self-help strategies and support, you can speed your recovery. Whether the trauma happened years ago or yesterday, you can make healing changes and move on.

What you can do

1. Learn about causes and risk factors of trauma
2. Move frequently in ways that exercise your arms and legs
3. Make face-to-face connection with others a priority
4. Learn about and practice things that soothe your nervous system
5. Make choices that will boost your physical health
6. Learn more by reading the related articles

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 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.

| Emotional and psychological trauma can be caused by:  |
| --- |
| **One-time events,** such as an accident, injury, natural disaster, or violent attack |
| **Ongoing, relentless stress,** such as living in a crime-ridden neighborhood or battling a life-threatening illness |
| **Commonly overlooked causes,** such as surgery (especially in the first 3 years of life), the sudden death of someone close, the breakup of a significant relationship, or a humiliating or deeply disappointing experience |

**An event can lead to 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

Risk factors

A number of risk factors make people more susceptible to emotional and psychological trauma. You’re more likely to be traumatized by a stressful experience if you’re already under a heavy stress load, have recently suffered a series of losses, or have 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. When childhood trauma is not resolved, a sense of fear and helplessness carries over into adulthood, setting the stage for further trauma.

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

* An unstable or unsafe environment
* Separation from a parent
* Serious illness
* Intrusive medical procedures
* [Sexual, physical, or verbal abuse](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/abuse/child-abuse-and-neglect.htm)
* Domestic violence
* Neglect
* [Bullying](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/abuse/dealing-with-bullying.htm)

Symptoms

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

Emotional & psychological symptoms:

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

Physical symptoms:

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

Symptoms 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 something that reminds you of the trauma.

**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. The natural reaction to this loss is grief. Like people who have lost a loved one, trauma survivors go through a [grieving process](http://www.helpguide.org/articles/grief-loss/coping-with-grief-and-loss.htm), which is easier if you turn to others for support and take care of yourself.