



# Understanding PTSD

## Trauma and Recovery

If you experience a disaster or traumatic event, the days that follow can be emotionally difficult. You are likely to experience a range of feelings, from anger to fear to helplessness. Do not be afraid to seek help or to talk to someone about what you are experiencing. The following information addresses ways you can better manage your emotions and take control of your life following a tragedy.

### After a Traumatic Event

The period that follows a traumatic situation or catastrophic incident is never easy. Such events typically leave emotional scars that take time to heal. During this period, it is normal to experience a range of emotions.

What is important is to acknowledge these feelings, let them run their course and give yourself time to properly grieve. This is part of the healing process. Some of the emotions you may experience include:

- Shock: You cannot believe the event even happened.
- Fear: You worry that it may happen again.
- Anger: Your rage may be directed against a higher power, the perpetrator or the circumstances that led up to the event. You also may feel that the event was unfair and question why it happened to you or to others.
- Shame: You are burdened with a sense that the event has disgraced you or your family or has violated your innocence.
- Alienation: You sense rejection or being misunderstood by others or that the event has made you different from others.
- Helplessness: Frustration grows about being powerless over circumstances.
- Guilt or blame: You take responsibility for what happened or feel guilty that you survived and others did not.
- Mistrust: You develop unfounded doubts or mistrust about others.
- Sorrow: You feel incredibly sad that the event happened to you or to others.

Most people respond to traumatic events or situations through a series of coping stages. These stages vary in order and length from person to person:

1. **Outcry:** This stage usually occurs shortly after the trauma. The survivor can feel confused, dazed, anxious and exhausted as he or she tries to process the reality of the event.
2. **Denial:** As a defence mechanism, the survivor may try to hide from what happened, ignore his or her feelings, refuse to talk about what happened or the details of the event or even shut down emotionally.
3. **Intrusion:** Memories and emotions may invade the survivor's consciousness as he or she struggles to come to grips with the loss. The survivor may experience mood changes and irritability, encounter difficulty concentrating, become sensitive to external stimuli or encounter sleep disturbances.
4. **Working through:** The survivor has learned to accept what has happened and has adopted strategies to help cope and heal.

### Warning Signs

Survivors of a traumatic event sometimes develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which can have a variety of symptoms. These symptoms tend to linger in those who do not seek treatment and can seriously interfere with a person's ability to cope with the event. If you experience any of the following symptoms over a prolonged period, seek help.

- Recurring nightmares, flashbacks or troubling thoughts about the event
- Regularly being on edge, nervous, overly alert or easily startled
- Feeling intense fear and anxiety, especially when exposed to situations, persons or stimuli reminiscent of the trauma
- Feeling depressed, sad and lethargic
- Feeling hopelessness, despair and futility
- Difficulty focusing and concentrating or a feeling of being "scattered"

- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty eating
- Difficulty remembering details
- Emotional detached from others

### Tips for Coping After a Traumatic Event

- Settle your situation. Remove yourself from environments in which the potential for further trauma or emotional duress exist.
- Reach out to others for support. Take comfort in the love and care of family and friends. Join a local support group for survivors of trauma.
- Find an expert you can trust. Ultimately, you should feel comfortable confiding in the therapist or counselor you choose.
- Take care of your body and your mind. Get plenty of rest. Take extra time off from work and other responsibilities. Eat right and exercise.
- Avoid unhealthy coping behaviours. Do not turn to drink or drugs to help you through this period. Find positive outlets and expressions, such as exercise, volunteer work or involvement in support groups, for your anxiety or stress.
- Find healing through writing. Many survivors find that keeping a journal and detailing their experiences through writing becomes a healthy, positive expression and coping technique. Try a daily gratitude journal, in which you jot down everything for which you feel grateful that day. It will take time to readjust and get back to normal after a traumatic event. Be patient during this period, and do not try to rush the healing process. There may be setbacks and emotional relapses along the journey. Do not ignore your feelings or what you are experiencing. Be honest with yourself and others. Make a commitment to learn from your experiences and turn difficult events into positive life lessons.

### Resources

- NHS: [www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Post-traumatic-stress-disorder/Pages/Introduction.aspx](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Post-traumatic-stress-disorder/Pages/Introduction.aspx)
- Royal College of Psychiatrists: [www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfo/problems/ptsd/posttraumaticstressdisorder.aspx](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfo/problems/ptsd/posttraumaticstressdisorder.aspx)
- Mind: [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk)

# Understanding Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Survivors and witnesses of traumatic events, such as war veterans and abuse victims, often have a difficult time resolving disturbing memories and anxious feelings. These life-jarring events can cause a condition known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This disorder can be treated successfully.

## Understanding PTSD

PTSD is a psychological condition that can occur after a terrifying event, such as a harrowing combat mission, earthquake, car crash, kidnapping, rape or near-death encounter. Whether the person was affected directly by the event, observed someone else's suffering or witnessed a mass disaster, the calamity has been ingrained in his or her consciousness. Typically, the person also has suffered some degree of physical trauma, but psychological scars often prove to be the hardest to heal.

People with PTSD continue to relive their horrifying experiences through recurrent memories, nightmares, persistent anxious thoughts and disturbing symptoms.

They also may experience flashbacks: out-of-reality episodes that can last from seconds to hours in which the person seems to relive the traumatic event.

Intense fear and feelings of loss of control and helplessness continue to resurface, especially around anniversaries of the event or exposure to stimuli that are reminders of the incident. Often, PTSD symptoms can be unprovoked, triggered by no apparent cause. When the symptoms are strong and frequent enough, the individual is usually unable to live a normal life and may not overcome the condition without professional treatment. Symptoms of PTSD may include:

- Repeatedly reliving the event through persistent memories, nightmares and flashbacks
- Avoidance of feelings, thoughts and activities that are reminders of the trauma
- Emotional numbness
- Detachment from family and friends
- Depression
- Increased lack of interest in favorite pastimes and activities
- Feelings of hopelessness, helplessness and loss of control
- Sudden or unprovoked anger or aggressive behavior
- Nervousness, jumpiness or irritability
- Sleep disturbances
- Difficulty concentrating

It is important to understand that every person who has PTSD experiences it differently. Symptoms can vary in frequency and severity. Not every traumatized person experiences PTSD.

Symptoms can appear immediately after the traumatic event or be delayed by six months or longer. Sometimes the illness does not surface until years following the event. Though it can affect anyone at any time, PTSD can be especially common among young children and elders who have lived through disturbing experiences. The symptoms also can be complicated by substance abuse.

## Treatment

Some people with PTSD find that their symptoms subside naturally and are able to recover without professional help. Others find that they are not able to get better without treatment. If you have survived a traumatic event and are experiencing any of the symptoms associated with PTSD, it is best to seek help.

Physicians treat PTSD differently than from other related conditions, such as phobias or obsessive-compulsive disorder. Several treatment options exist, and medication may be prescribed as an adjunct to therapy. Your involvement in treatment will require patience and diligence. Anxieties take time to resolve. The more you learn about the condition and recognize your patterns of thought and behavior, the better chance you may have of effectively managing the disorder. One treatment option is cognitive-behavioral therapy. Approaches include:

- Habituation exercises: Supervised by a therapist, this approach can help one to confront fears and learn to diminish the level of anxiety.
- Systematic desensitization (also called exposure and response prevention): These exercises expose the patient to the frightening thought or situation, such as returning to the scene of the trauma, in an effort to overcome the anxiety.
- Deep-breathing exercises and relaxation techniques: Progressive muscle-relaxation exercises teach the patient to tense, hold, focus on and slowly release different muscle groups to reduce the symptoms of anxiety.

Another widely used treatment method is psychotherapy, or “talk” therapy: working with a therapist to identify and resolve your fears and problems. A therapist may help you uncover the reasons behind your PTSD and suggest coping techniques. In psychotherapy, you learn to recognize how certain thoughts can provoke anxiety symptoms and how to change these thought patterns to decrease future anxiety episodes.

### Resources

- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)
- American Psychiatric Association: [www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)
- Freedom from Fear: [www.freedomfromfear.org](http://www.freedomfromfear.org)
- National Anxiety Foundation: [www.lexington-on-line.com/naf.html](http://www.lexington-on-line.com/naf.html)
- National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): [www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov)

## Identifying and Coping with Job-related Stress

First responders are at higher risk of experiencing work-related stress than those in other careers. While the most prominent cause of this is the regular exposure to traumatic incidents, there are plenty of other factors, including more typical workplace stressors, involved as well. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health recommends that all workers involved in response activities help themselves and their co-workers to reduce stress by utilizing simple methods to recognize, monitor and maintain their health.

Stress causes a variety of physical and emotional changes in people. Supervisors (and employees) should be trained to recognize the common signs of stress and burnout in other people. If you are aware of these signs, you can implement specific changes in day-to-day activities to minimize or even eliminate job-related stress from your workplace and your life.

### Typical Causes of Workplace Stress

A conflict with a supervisor... feeling overwhelmed with tasks and responsibilities... a noisy air conditioning unit... a longer-than-normal commute... There are any number of things, from seemingly minor to undeniably large, that can cause a person to feel stressed out in the workplace.

Causes of stress will vary from person to person and not everyone will feel anxiety from the same stressors. Some thrive in environments in which they face regular emergencies situations. Others would find working under these conditions to be extremely stressful.

Outside of emergency-response situations, sources of work-related stress commonly cited by employees include:

- Long or difficult commutes to work
- Disagreements with co-workers or supervisors
- Having disagreeable or difficult co-workers
- Experiencing verbal abuse
- Feeling overworked
- Feeling unappreciated
- Having difficult deadlines to meet
- Feeling underpaid
- Job insecurity
- Having to take work home
- Diminished benefits
- Feeling tasks are monotonous, repetitive or redundant
- Working long hours
- Fear of physical violence in the workplace

### Signs of Stress

Stress can manifest itself in a multitude of physical or emotional changes.

#### Physical signs of stress include:

- Headaches and migraines
- Stomachaches and ulcers
- Back and muscle pain
- Grinding teeth
- Feeling lightheaded
- Trouble sleeping
- Fatigue
- Poor appetite
- Panic attacks
- Difficulty concentrating
- Rashes, itching and hives
- Weight gain or loss
- A weakened immune system (making it harder for the body to fight viruses and bacteria)
- Increase in drinking, smoking or drug use

#### Emotional signs of stress include:

- Forgetfulness
- Excessive nervousness, anxiety and worry
- Increased anger and hostility
- Mood swings
- Depression
- Difficulty communicating
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Withdrawal from social interaction

## Ways to Manage or Eliminate Stress

If you feel job stress, whether minor or severe, there are ways to minimize the effects. Here are some suggestions for coping with job-related stress:

- Exercise before going to work. Physical exertion is a great way to relieve or reduce stress, so try exercising a little before you go to the office. Put in some time on the treadmill or sign up for a morning spin class.
- Take breaks during the workday. If you are at a desk most of the day, get up and walk around for five minutes every hour. Stretch your legs with a walk around your floor or building to clear your mind. Think about something besides work-related tasks while walking.
- Smile. It seems too easy, but simply having a smile on your face can help reduce stress levels. Think about how you interact with other people; don't you enjoy being greeted by a smiling person more than by somebody who is frowning or who looks mad? Give people a smile and watch your work environment brighten up.
- Avoid confrontational situations. If you are having difficulty with a specific person at your job, try to avoid him or her. Ask to work on a different team or on different tasks. Include other people in all conversations you have with the person so you aren't alone with them.
- Delegate tasks. Many people try to do too much, even when working in a team environment in which everyone is supposed to pull equal loads. Allow other people to do some of the tasks you enjoy less and spend more of your time doing the tasks you enjoy.
- Talk with your supervisor. No one wants a burned-out workforce. High job-related stress levels lead to high job turnover rates, which costs employers money. Your supervisor or HR department may have some suggestions for minimizing the stress you are feeling at work.
- Take a vacation. How long has it been since you were away from the office for more than a three-day weekend? There is a reason you get vacation days every year. Go someplace, leave your work behind and spend time doing things for yourself, not for your employer.
- Seek help from your Employee Assistance Program. The stress and anxiety we feel can be minimized by our own efforts, but sometimes it is necessary to seek the assistance of a counselor or other mental health professional. Your EAP can put you in touch with a counselor, who can help you with ways to reduce and eliminate work-related stress.

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Contact us anytime for confidential assistance.

# Manager's Guide: Helping Employees Deal With Traumatic Events

When people experience a major traumatic event, they may experience a sense of helplessness, serious injury or a threat of death. Major traumatic events affect survivors, rescue workers, members of the media and 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.

The period that follows a traumatic situation is not easy. Such events may leave emotional scars that may take time to heal. During this time, it is normal to feel a range of emotions. It is important to acknowledge these feelings, let them run their course and allow for enough time to properly process the event. This is part of the healing process.

## What are common responses to tragedy?

Emotional responses to a traumatic event may vary. People may exhibit feelings of fear, grief and depression. Physical and behavioral responses include nausea, dizziness and changes in appetite or sleep pattern, as well as withdrawal from daily activities. Responses to trauma can last a few days, weeks or months before people resolve their reactions to the event.

Some of the emotions a person may experience include:

- Shock. Feelings of disbelief.
- Fear. The feeling that the event may happen again.
- Anger. Many people feel rage against a perpetrator or the circumstances that led up to the event.
- Alienation. Feeling misunderstood by others or feeling that the event has made the person experiencing the trauma different from others.
- Helplessness. Feelings of frustration for being powerless over the event.
- Guilt or blame. Feeling responsible for what happened or guilty for surviving the event when others did not.
- Mistrust. Feeling unfounded doubts or mistrust about others or similar situations.
- Sorrow. Feelings of great sadness about the event.

## Stages of Coping

Most people respond to traumatic events through a series of coping stages. These stages may vary from person to person:

1. Shock. This stage usually occurs shortly after the event. The survivor can feel confused, dazed, anxious and exhausted as he or she tries to process the reality of the event.
2. Denial. As a defense mechanism, the survivor may ignore his/her feelings, refuse to talk about what happened or shut down emotionally.
3. Intrusion. Memories and emotions may invade the survivor's consciousness as he or she struggles to accept the loss. The survivor may experience mood changes, irritability, encounter difficulty concentrating, become sensitive to external stimuli and encounter sleep disturbances.
4. Working through. The survivor has learned to accept what has happened and adopt strategies to cope with the aftermath.

## Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Most people report feeling better within three months after a traumatic event. If the difficulties in daily functioning become worse or last longer than one month after the event, the person may be suffering from a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Post-traumatic stress disorder is an intense physical and emotional response to thoughts and reminders of the traumatic event. The symptoms of PTSD fall into three broad types: re-living, avoidance and increased arousal.

- Symptoms of re-living may include flashbacks, nightmares and extreme emotional and physical reactions to reminders of the event. Emotional reactions can include feelings of guilt, extreme fear of harm and numbing of emotions. Physical reactions can include uncontrollable shaking, chills, heart palpitations and tension headaches.
- Symptoms of avoidance may include staying away from activities, places, thoughts or feelings related to the trauma or isolating from others.
- Symptoms of increased arousal may include being overly alert or easily startled, difficulty sleeping, irritability, outbursts of anger and lack of concentration.

Other symptoms linked with PTSD may include panic attacks, depression, suicidal thoughts, drug/alcohol abuse and not being able to complete daily tasks.

### When To Get Help for PTSD

About half of those with PTSD recover within three months without treatment. Sometimes symptoms persist and may 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 one's life, the frequency of the event, history of past trauma and psychological difficulties prior to the event.

People should consider seeking professional help when symptoms affect their relationship with family and friends, or affect their daily level of functioning, including job performance. You can contact your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) or talk with a health care provider to get help.

### Tips for Employees Dealing With a Traumatic Event

The following tips can help one to cope with a traumatic event:

- Understand that the reactions are normal, especially right after the event.
- Keep your usual daily 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 event.
- Find ways to relax and be kind to yourself.
- Turn to family, friends and others for support. Talk about your experiences and feelings with them.
- Participate in leisure and recreational activities.
- Recognize that you cannot control everything.
- Recognize the need for professional help and contact your Employee Assistance Program.
- Reach out to others for support. Take comfort in the love and care of family and friends. Join a local support group for survivors of trauma.
- Take care of your body and your mind. Get plenty of rest. Eat right and exercise.
- Avoid unhealthy coping behaviors. Do not turn to drugs or alcohol to help you cope. Find positive outlets and expressions, such as exercise, volunteer work or involvement in support groups.
- Find healing through writing. Many survivors find that keeping a journal and detailing their experiences through writing becomes a healthy, positive expression and coping technique. Try a daily gratitude journal by writing everything for which you feel grateful that day.
- It will take time to readjust and get back to your daily routine after a traumatic event. Be patient during this period, and do not rush the healing process.
- There may be setbacks and emotional relapses along the way. Do not ignore your feelings or reactions. Be honest with yourself and others. Make a commitment to learn from your experiences and turn difficult events into positive life lessons.

## Tips for Managers To Help Employees Cope

- Give your employee the gift of being listened to empathically. Helping your employees feel that their concerns are being heard can be more powerful than trying to come up with solutions.
- Though some temporary adjustments in deadlines and expectations can be helpful for employees having a difficult time, remember that a return to routine is also a part of healing.
- Be flexible and support employees as they resume their usual responsibilities. Express confidence in their ability to perform their jobs under difficult circumstances.
- Remember that everyone reacts differently and at a different rate. Some of the factors in how an employee recovers include past trauma, personality traits such as optimism and coping skills.
- During and after a traumatic event, it can be helpful to see us as part of something bigger than ourselves. After 9-11, for example, employees took pride in their efforts to return to Lower Manhattan. Organizing a charitable drive or other event can help employees feel that they are contributing to an overall recovery.
- Remind employees that it is particularly important to take care of themselves during stressful times. Eating healthy foods and getting the right amount of sleep is beneficial to cope with stress. At the same time, lack of sleep or reliance on alcohol to cope can make matters worse and postpone the recovery process.
- Make sure to take care of yourself during stressful times. Pay attention to your own stress levels and seek help as needed. Your Employee Assistance Program is a good place to turn for help after a traumatic event.

## How Your GuidanceResources Employee Assistance Program Can Help

- The EAP can help you decide what resources may best assist your employees following a traumatic event.
- In some cases, it may be helpful for a counselor to come to the site and provide supportive services to the affected team members. These Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) services are often done in a group setting. The goals of a CISM are to normalize employees' responses, help them anticipate the stages of emotions they may experience and provide them with tools to cope. To schedule a CISM, contact your HR department or call your GuidanceResources toll-free number.
- During large-scale natural disasters (hurricanes, wildfires, etc.) the GuidanceResources® Online home page contains updated information that may be useful to you and your employees. This information may include shelters, road and school closings and other valuable emergency information. To access this information go to [www.guidanceresources.com](http://www.guidanceresources.com). If you are a first-time user you will be prompted to enter your Company ID. As a manager you can also e-mail this information to your employees.
- If you feel an individual employee is having a difficult time coping with a traumatic event, you can suggest he or she call the EAP for assistance. You can stress that the service is confidential and professional.

## Here when you need us.

Call:

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