

Trauma: How to Help Yourself or a Friend

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WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma is the psychological and emotional response that occurs after a distressing or life-threatening event, such as the loss of a loved one, natural disaster, or physical attack. Trauma happens when the amount of stress exceeds your ability to cope with the emotions caused by the traumatic experience.

But what does trauma look like? How is it different from just feeling upset by a bad experience? Signs that your, or a friend's reaction to a distressing event may be evidence of trauma include:

1. Frequently replaying the event in your mind
2. Having nightmares
3. A pervasive feeling that the world is generally unsafe or seemingly endless worries about the future
4. Avoiding situations that cause strong emotions or events, relationships, or subjects that remind you of the trauma
5. Difficulty trusting others in the wake of the event
6. Feeling unusually irritable, angry, moody, or sad or irrationally blaming yourself for bad things that have happened in the past
7. Difficulty concentrating
8. Changes in appetite, grooming, or social habits
9. Feeling jumpy or easily startled
10. Using alcohol or drugs to numb or change the way you feel (also known as self-medicating)

TIPS FOR COPING AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT

1. **Maintain routines:** Try to stick to your routine as much as possible. When everything feels chaotic and disordered, routines can be a way of reassuring yourself that life will be okay again. If you are homeless or temporarily relocated, try to establish new routines. If you're supporting a friend who's experienced trauma, it can be helpful to maintain the normal, everyday things you do together but also let them know why you're doing it. "I know having some normalcy can help when things feel overwhelming, but I'm not forgetting what you're going through and I don't expect you to be OK right away."
2. **Talk about it:** It can be hard to talk about a traumatic experience but speaking up is the first step to recovery. Reaching out to your parents or another adult you trust to be supportive can help you make sense of what happened and help you stay healthy and safe. Likewise, if a friend has been through something traumatic, it's important to listen and be kind. But remember, trauma is complicated, and healing takes time and a lot of support. You can't help anyone if you're feeling burned out. The best way to care for both your friend and yourself is by encouraging them to speak with supportive adults in their life and/or a mental health professional. You'll be creating the space you need to be there for them in a healthy way and ensuring they get the help they need to recover.
3. **News:** Some traumas are personal, like an assault or a death in the family. Others like school shootings or natural disasters affect entire communities. When traumatic events are played out on a large scale, it can be hard to know how to cope and how to help. Try to turn off and tune out. If the distressing event is a national emergency or trauma, prevent or limit exposure to news coverage. Seeing disturbing events recounted on TV or in the newspaper can make them feel ongoing.
4. **Volunteer:** If you've experienced a natural disaster or community violence, take action and find ways to volunteer or get involved. Contributing to and supporting a cause can help provide a sense of purpose and control.
5. **Memorialize:** If you have lost a loved one, finding a way to honor their life can help bring closure and accept the loss. This can involve planting a tree, sharing stories, burning a candle - whatever feels right to you.
6. **Practice self-care:** Practicing self-care can help you cope with the stress and provide a sense of normalcy. Do things you find relaxing or calming. Participate in activities that give you the chance to take some time for yourself. Remember, self-care doesn't need to be complicated. Spend time with family and friends, go for a run, or watch a movie, anything healthy that makes you feel calmer and better.

HOW TO ENCOURAGE A FRIEND TO GET HELP AND SUPPORT THEM

1. **Have a talk.** Find a time when you and your friend can be in a safe, quiet space where you know they feel comfortable. Let them know you've noticed that they're having a tough time and offer your support. Remember, you're not there for details unless they wish to share them. Your focus should be on noticing, supporting, and encouraging coping skills. In-depth conversations about the trauma should be reserved for treatment providers.
2. **Avoid trying to soothe, explain away, or solve your friend's worries.** Instead, simply confirm what you're hearing: "Yes, I can see that you're worried." Don't worry about knowing exactly the right thing to say — after all, there is no answer that will make everything okay.
3. **Not everyone wants to talk.** If a friend is reluctant, don't force it. They may need more time to process what's happened or might just be more comfortable talking about it with someone else, and that's OK. Let them know that you're 100% fine with whatever they decide but that you're there if they need you, and you'll keep checking in.
4. **Encourage your friend to seek treatment.**

TYPES OF TREATMENT

Good treatment can make all the difference when recovering from a traumatic event.

Effective treatment can have a serious impact in reducing unwanted, upsetting memories related to the trauma, helping you to make sense of what happened and why, restoring your sense of safety and reaffirming the trustworthiness of others, reducing self-blame and guilt, and providing healthy, lasting coping skills. The two most effective methods of treatment for trauma are:

1. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) teaches patients how to become more aware of unhelpful or painful thoughts and beliefs around the trauma and helps clients build skills to help them react to emotional triggers in a healthier way.
2. Exposure therapy is another form of cognitive behavioral therapy that reduces the fear associated with the emotional triggers caused by the trauma. A supportive and highly trained clinician guides people through talking about detailed memories of the trauma to reduce unwanted and distressing memories.

HOW TO FIND TREATMENT

Professionals can be found by talking to parents or other people you trust, using Psychology Today or through an insurance provider. WebMD provides a helpful guide on how to start your search and what to look for.

RESOURCES

HOW TO ADDRESS A CRISIS SITUATION

1. Call 911 immediately if you're concerned that you or a friend are unsafe, may be in danger of self-harm, or may be suicidal or overdosing. Tell responders as many details as possible so they can be prepared when they arrive.
2. Free, 24-hr, anonymous hotlines:
 - Crisis Text Line: text UROK to 741741
 - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: call 1-800-273-8255

EXPERT INFORMATION

- Child Mind Institute
- National Alliance for Mental Health (NAMI)
- National Center for PTSD
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network
- WebMD

COMMUNITIES

- Project UROK
- Born This Way Foundation
- To Write Love On Her Arms
- The Mighty

Join our inclusive online community

    @projecturok

Share your mental health story to inspire others,
email projecturok@childmind.org