

Emotional and Psychological Trauma: Causes, Symptoms, Effects, and Treatment

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/emotional_psychological_trauma.htm

It is not the event that determines whether something is traumatic to someone, but the individual's experience of the event.

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Trauma. The word brings to mind the effects of such major events as war, rape, kidnapping, abuse, or surviving a natural disaster. The emotional aftermath of such events, recognized by the medical and psychological communities, and increasingly by the general public, is known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Now there is a new field of investigation that is less familiar, even to professionals: emotional or psychological trauma.

What is emotional or psychological trauma?

The ability to recognize emotional trauma has changed radically over the course of history. Until rather recently psychological trauma was noted only in men after catastrophic wars. The women's movement in the sixties broadened the definition of emotional trauma to include physically and sexually abused women and children. Now because of the discoveries made in the nineties, known as the decade of the brain, psychological trauma has further broadened its definition.

Recent research has revealed that emotional trauma can result from such common occurrences as an auto accident, the breakup of a significant relationship, a humiliating or deeply disappointing experience, the discovery of a life-threatening illness or disabling condition, or other similar situations. Traumatizing events can take a serious emotional toll on those involved, even if the event did not cause physical damage.

Regardless of its source, an emotional trauma contains three common elements:

it was unexpected

the person was unprepared

there was nothing the person could do to prevent it from happening

It is not the event that determines whether something is traumatic to someone, but the individual's experience of the event. And it is not predictable how a given person will react to a particular event. For someone who is used to being in control of emotions and events, it may be surprising – even embarrassing – to discover that something like an accident or job loss can be so debilitating.

What causes emotional or psychological trauma?

Our brains are structured into three main parts, long observed in autopsies:

the cortex (the outer surface, where higher thinking skills arise; includes the frontal cortex, the most recently evolved portion of the brain)

the limbic system (the center of the brain, where emotions evolve)

the brain stem (the reptilian brain that controls basic survival functions)

Because of the development of brain scan technology, scientists can now observe the brain in action, without waiting for an autopsy. These scans reveal that trauma actually changes the structure and function of the brain, at the point where the frontal cortex, the emotional brain and the survival brain converge. A significant finding is that brain scans of people with relationship or developmental problems, learning problems, and social problems related to emotional intelligence reveal similar structural and functional irregularities to those resulting from PTSD.

What is the difference between stress and emotional or psychological trauma?

One way to tell the difference between stress and emotional trauma is by looking at the outcome—how much residual effect an upsetting event is having on our lives, relationships, and overall functioning. Traumatic distress can be distinguished from routine stress by assessing the following:

- how quickly upset is triggered
- how frequently upset is triggered
- how intensely threatening the source of upset is
- how long upset lasts
- how long it takes to calm down

If we can communicate our distress to people who care about us and can respond adequately, and if we return to a state of equilibrium following a stressful event, we are in the realm of stress. If we become frozen in a state of active emotional intensity, we are experiencing an emotional trauma—even though sometimes we may not be consciously aware of the level of distress we are experiencing.

Why can an event cause an emotionally traumatic response in one person and not in another? There is no clear answer to this question, but it is likely that one or more of these factors are involved:

- the severity of the event
- the individual's personal history (which may not even be recalled)
- the larger meaning the event represents for the individual (which may not be immediately evident)
- coping skills, values and beliefs held by the individual (some of which may have never been identified)

the reactions and support from family, friends, and/or professionals

Anyone can become traumatized. Even professionals who work with trauma, or other people close to a traumatized person, can develop symptoms of "vicarious" or "secondary" traumatization. Developing symptoms is never a sign of weakness. Symptoms should be taken seriously and steps should be taken to heal, just as one would take action to heal from a physical ailment. And just as with a physical condition, the amount of time or assistance needed to recover from emotional trauma will vary from one person to another.

What are the symptoms of emotional trauma?

There are common effects or conditions that may occur following a traumatic event. Sometimes these responses can be delayed, for months or even years after the event. Often people do not initially associate their symptoms with the precipitating trauma. The following are symptoms

that may result from a more commonplace, unresolved trauma, especially if there were earlier, overwhelming life experiences:

Physical

Eating disturbances (more or less than usual)

Sleep disturbances (more or less than usual)

Sexual dysfunction

Low energy

Chronic, unexplained pain

Emotional

Depression, spontaneous crying, despair and hopelessness

Anxiety

Panic attacks

Fearfulness

Compulsive and obsessive behaviors

Feeling out of control

Irritability, angry and resentment

Emotional numbness

Withdrawal from normal routine and relationships

Cognitive

Memory lapses, especially about the trauma

Difficulty making decisions

Decreased ability to concentrate

Feeling distracted

The following additional symptoms of emotional trauma are commonly associated with a severe precipitating event, such as a natural disaster, exposure to war, rape, assault, violent crime, major car or airplane crashes, or child abuse. Extreme symptoms can also occur as a delayed reaction to the traumatic event.

Re-experiencing the trauma

intrusive thoughts

flashbacks or nightmares

sudden floods of emotions or images related to the traumatic event

Emotional numbing and avoidance

amnesia

avoidance of situations that resemble the initial event

detachment

depression

guilt feelings

grief reactions

an altered sense of time

Increased arousal

hyper-vigilance, jumpiness, an extreme sense of being "on guard"

overreactions, including sudden unprovoked anger

general anxiety

insomnia

obsessions with death

What are the possible effects of emotional trauma?

Even when unrecognized, emotional trauma can create lasting difficulties in an individual's life.

One way to determine whether an emotional or psychological trauma has occurred, perhaps even

early in life before language or conscious awareness were in place, is to look at the kinds of

recurring problems one might be experiencing. These can serve as clues to an earlier situation

that caused a dysregulation in the structure or function of the brain.

Common personal and behavioral effects of emotional trauma:

substance abuse

compulsive behavior patterns

self-destructive and impulsive behavior

uncontrollable reactive thoughts

inability to make healthy professional or lifestyle choices

dissociative symptoms ("splitting off" parts of the self)

feelings of ineffectiveness, shame, despair, hopelessness

feeling permanently damaged

a loss of previously sustained beliefs

Common effects of emotional trauma on interpersonal relationships:

inability to maintain close relationships or choose appropriate friends and mates

sexual problems

hostility

arguments with family members, employers or co-workers

social withdrawal

feeling constantly threatened

If an unsatisfying love relationship is a part of your problem mix, see Helpguide's series,

Relationship Help: Communication Skills to Find and Keep a Healthy Exciting Love

Relationship.

What if symptoms don't go away, or appear at a later time?

Over time, even without professional treatment, symptoms of an emotional trauma generally

subside, and normal daily functioning gradually returns. However, even after time has passed,

sometimes the symptoms don't go away. Or they may appear to be gone, but surface again in

another stressful situation. When a person's daily life functioning or life choices continue to be

affected, a post-traumatic stress disorder may be the problem, requiring professional assistance.

How is emotional trauma treated?

Traditional approaches to treating emotional trauma include:

talk therapies (working out the feelings associated with the trauma)

Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (CBT) involves changing one's thoughts and actions, and includes systematic desensitization to reduce reactivity to a traumatic stressor

relaxation/stress reduction techniques, such as biofeedback and breathwork

hypnosis to deal with reactions often below the level of conscious awareness

There are also several recent developments in the treatment of emotional trauma. Depending on the nature of the trauma and the age or state of development at which it occurred, these somatic (body) psychotherapies might even be more effective than traditional therapies. Some of the new therapies include:

EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprogramming)

Somatic Experiencing

Hakomi

Integrative Body Psychotherapy

Improving intimate love relationships — especially when trauma occurs early in life — is another means of healing disabilities caused by emotional trauma. See Helpguide's series, Relationship Help: Communication Skills to Find and Keep a Healthy Exciting Love Relationship, on building strong and trusting intimate love relationships.

References and resources for emotional trauma

General Information

Coping with Disaster: After Hurricane Katrina – This page provides coping information for those dealing with stress and trauma in response to the recent tragedy. Includes coping information for adult and child victims, volunteers, and those who have been displaced. An archive of relevant articles about coping with recent national and world events is also included. (National Mental Health Association)

A New Perspective on Emotional Trauma – A non-commercial website that clearly describes the new brain-based view of emotional trauma. Includes a video, numerous articles, and transcripts of presentations by leaders in this new field. (Trauma Resources)

Emotional Trauma Webpage – Defines this new field, and contains an article describing an application of the new psychotherapies for trauma. (Dr. Jeanne Segal)

Trauma Pages - Supportive Information – A comprehensive list of links related to various types of trauma, treatments, support, and related issues. (Trauma Pages)

Managing Traumatic Stress – A fact sheet that includes tips for recovering from trauma, including disasters such as floods and hurricanes. (American Psychological Association)

Therapeutic approaches for emotional and other trauma

Finding a Professional – Offers a referral network of professional therapists who are members of this organization dedicated to the diagnosis, treatment and cure of anxiety. (Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA))

What is a traumatic experience? – Provides trauma information for adults and children as well as a description of cognitive therapy as a treatment for trauma and a search tool for finding a certified cognitive therapist. (Academy of Cognitive Therapy)

What is Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy? – Describes several treatment approaches and provides referrals. (National Association of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapists (NACBT))

What is Biofeedback? – Provides a definition of this non-invasive form of treatment and also offers a referral locator. (Biofeedback Certification Institute of America)

Breathing for Relaxation – Describes rhythmic yoga breathing exercises meant to help achieve a state of calm. (Holistic Online)

What is Hypnosis? – From the American Society of Clinical Hypnosis, this site defines hypnosis, describes its clinical applications, and offers a list of referrals. (American Society of Clinical Hypnosis (ASCH))

Trauma information for children and adolescents

Helping Children and Adolescents Cope with Violence and Disasters – This site describes how to help at various age levels may react to traumatic event and how to recognize and handle PTSD. Also includes a useful resource list. (National Institute of Mental Health)

Helping Children After a Disaster – A briefer article that explains how to identify, prevent or minimize PTSD in children. (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry)

Helping Children Handle Disaster-Related Anxiety – Offers “quick tips” for parents looking to help children at different age levels handle disaster-related anxiety, but the information is relevant to any anxiety. (National Mental Health Association)

How to Help Your Child Following a Traumatic Event – Cedars-Sinai Medical Center provides parent tips and describes common behavioral responses to trauma seen in children at different age levels. (Psychological Trauma Center)

Related Helpguide articles

Emotional First Aid: Tips for Coping with a Traumatic Event

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): Symptoms, Types, and Treatment

Coping with Disasters: Natural, War, Rape and Other Traumas

Anxiety Attacks and Disorders: Symptoms, Causes, and Treatment

Depression: Signs, Symptoms, Causes, and Treatment Strategies

Emotional First Aid: Tips for Coping with a Traumatic Event

http://www.helpguide.org/mental/emotional_firstaid.htm

People can have many different reactions to a tragedy or feel all of them in sequence. Often we feel first shock, then denial, anger and depression before we move to grief and acceptance.

Gina Ross, MFCC, and Peter Levine, Ph.D., of the Foundation for Human Enrichment contributed to this article. Last modified on: 9/3/04.

When traumatic events happen, they challenge our sense of safety and predictability and this may trigger strong physical and emotional reactions in us. These reactions are normal. Emotional First Aid gives you information on how to help yourself, your family and friends in response to witnessing, hearing or living through the traumatic events.

Do's and don'ts

Try to get the information about your loved ones ASAP, watch the news for a limited time to get the information you need and then turn off the T.V. or the radio for a while. You can turn the TV on every two hours to get more details, but do not get hooked on the repetitive traumatic images it is showing. These images have the uncanny ability to suck us in and keep us glued to the screen, even if it makes us feel worse after. Resist the pull to watch.

Don't be isolated. Get together with family and friends and support each other. The understanding and support of our loved ones help us cope with tragedy much faster. It is crucial to validate the feelings of fear and helplessness of others even if we are reacting and coping better than them. People have different ways of responding to shocking events. There is no right or wrong reaction.

Seek professional help if your reaction feels too strong to handle on your own or with your friends. It doesn't mean you are crazy or weak.

Keep busy and as structured a schedule as possible.

Organize and meet in community groups in neighborhoods, YMCAs and religious centers.

It is crucial to refocus on your resources, anything that helps you feel calmer, stronger and more grounded. Refocus on all your support systems, whether people, activities or places. Do things that keep your mind occupied, such as watching a movie, knitting, gardening, cooking, playing with children or pets or going in nature.

Write your sensations, feelings and thoughts. It has been shown to help discharge the anxiety and regain control.

Get sufficient rest. The tendency is to run on adrenaline and exhaust our body.

Encourage people and yourself not to tell their stories in a repetitive way which ultimately deepens the trauma, and instead support and hear each other about this real tragedy/catastrophe, but with interruptions of the story from beginning to end. Allow yourself to feel the feelings you are feeling even if they are not pretty. Anger, rage and the desire for revenge are very natural responses to man-made traumatic events. Feel your feelings and allow your emotions to be expressed in a rational framework. This will help you to process feelings without overwhelming yourself and help you not get stuck in obsessive thinking.

Feelings are not actions. Make sure you chose to take productive actions.

Stay active and volunteer help in the hospitals or give blood. You can send money or help staff help lines for distressed people. Help traumatized friends and family by listening to them without judgment, not taking it personally if they angry or blaming, by spending time with their children to give them private time, by helping them with normal everyday households tasks.

Psychological response

People can have many different reactions to the tragedy or feel all of them in sequence. Often we feel first shock, then denial, anger and depression before we move to grief and acceptance.

Some will be in shock, stunned and dissociated for a while. They may feel disoriented in time, and place, and sometimes in person. They may feel numb and cut off from the terror and pain. People may feel fear and deep sorrow, uncertainty and helplessness. These feelings are normal too and will pass.

People may feel confused, not able to think well, concentrate, remember things or problem-solve. They may feel depressed, exhausted unable to rest and wanting to withdraw. All of these feelings are normal if they don't last for a long time.

People may feel agitated, anxious, hyper-alert and hyper-vigilant ("on guard"), easily irritated and unable to control their emotions. They need to engage in activities and creative expression that calms them. Being with family members and friends can help calming.

People may feel suspicious and paranoid. They may be feeling intense anger and wanting to engage in antisocial acts. They can become very critical and blame everyone. It is important to talk to friends and check with them the reality of our impressions and to not engage in any act that we cannot share with different friends.

Children may become 'clingy' and have nightmares. They may stomachaches and headaches. Alternatively, they may act out aggressively. This is normal. It might last a few days or more but it will pass. They need to be reassured and made to feel protected.

Physiological response

It is natural to have a physical reaction to this stress, so don't let these scare you. It is good to recognize signs of 'activation' and not to be scared by them:

heart beating faster

difficulty breathing

blood pressure going up

stomach tightening, knot in the throat

skin cold and racy thoughts

These reactions will dissipate - go away - if we don't fight them.

People might experience some difficulty sleeping, wanting to eat too much, salty or sweet food, and might want to engage in addictive behaviors such as excessive use of alcohol or drugs. The best 'antidote' is to try to be aware of those and other impulses, and to be accepting that you are deeply upset.

Some people's old unresolved traumas may get re-triggered. Their sense of safety and trust may get shaken. They need to be reminded or remind themselves of their names, their actual age and today's date and place.

People's symptoms can be very diverse. They can be stable, or come and go. They can occur in clusters.

Helpful response

We can help our nervous system recuperate its balance by understanding how it discharges when it is over-stimulated. Some examples of this are:

trembling, shaking or sweating

warmth in our body
stomach gurgling
breathing deeply
crying or laughing

These are good, it means that we are discharging some of this the energy and coming back into balance. Mostly, we want to just observe what's happening in our body without judgment, just watching and understanding that our body has the innate ability to regain its balance if we just let it feel what it feels, and give it the time to do what it wants to do.

What to do

It is very important to stay "grounded". If you are feeling disoriented, confused, upset and in disbelief, you can do the following exercise:

Sit on a chair, feel your feet on the ground, press on your thighs, feel your behind on the seat, and your back supported by the chair; look around you and pick six objects that have red or blue. This should allow you to feel in the present, more grounded and in your body. Notice how your breath gets deeper and calmer. You may want to go outdoors and find a peaceful place to sit on the grass. As you do, feel how your bottom can be held and supported by the ground. Here is an exercise that will allow you to feel your body as a 'container' to hold your feelings.

Gently pat the different parts of your body with your hand, with a loose wrist. Your body may feel more tingling, more alive, sharp, you may feel more connected to your feelings.

Another exercise is to tense your muscles, each group at a time. Hold your shoulders with arms across your chest, tighten your grip on them and pat your arms up and down. Do the same with your legs, tighten them and hold them from the outside, patting through their length. Tighten your back, tighten your front, then gently release the tension. This may help you or your loved one feel more balanced.

Sports, aerobics and weight training help avoid depression and are a channel for aggression. If you believe in prayer or in some sort of greater power, pray for the rest of the souls of the dead, for the healing of the wounded, for consolation for the grieving. Pray for peace, for understanding and wisdom and for the forces of goodness to prevail. Do not give up faith in the ultimate goodness of being and keep your trust in humanity.

And last, just know that we, humans, are extremely resilient and have been able to recuperate from the most horrendous tragedies. Furthermore we have the ability to let ourselves be transformed by our traumas, when we heal them and open ourselves to the possibility.

Related Helpguide articles

[Emotional and Psychological Trauma: Causes, Symptoms, Effects, and Treatment](#)

[Coping with Disasters: Natural, War, Rape and Other Traumas](#)

[Post-traumatic Stress Disorder \(PTSD\): Symptoms, Types, and Treatment](#)

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[Anxiety Attacks and Disorders: Symptoms, Causes, and Treatment](#)

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