

A guide for people who have experienced a traumatic event.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This guide has been developed to provide basic information useful to people who have experienced a traumatic event.

What is a traumatic event?

An event is considered "traumatic" when a person experiences, witnesses, or is confronted with actual or threatened death or serious injury or a threat to the physical integrity of themselves or others. The person's response must have also involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.

What is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a psychological reaction, which can manifest itself after a traumatic event. A person who develops post-traumatic stress disorder will display three major symptoms:

- Continually reliving the traumatic event or having nightmares about it.
- Avoidance — conscious or involuntary — of things that serve to remind the victim of the traumatic event.
- Hyperarousal in the absence of imminent risk - being on the look-out for a danger that is not present.

Is it common to experience a traumatic event?

According to one study in the US, 90% of Americans experience a traumatic event such as a car accident, a physical or sexual assault, a hold-up, being taken hostage, a work-place accident, a natural disaster, etc. in their lifetime. This proportion is generally lower in other western countries.

Is it common to develop post-traumatic stress disorder after experiencing a traumatic event?

Research shows that 9% of people who experience a traumatic event are likely to develop post-traumatic stress disorder. This figure is only indicative; the proportion varies according to the type of event and the individual. Some studies suggest that women are two times as likely to be affected.

How long will I feel like this?

The intensity of post-traumatic stress syndrome varies greatly, as does the duration, lasting anything from several weeks to several years. Around half of those who present symptoms will get over them on their own within one to two years. Others will develop more chronic problems. If you experience symptoms for six months or more, it is strongly recommended that you consult a therapist. It is also advisable to seek help before this if you think it might be required.

Does it go away by itself or do I need to seek professional help?

The decision to consult a specialist such as a psychologist or a psychiatrist is a personal one that depends on how distressing your symptoms are. Whereas many get by without professional help, consultation may help you to get well more quickly.

Will I be the same as before the trauma, one day?

Every experience changes us. To try and 'return things to the way they were' is a universal desire that is rarely achievable. If you cannot get back to the way you were, you will need to find a new balance and possibly draw on this experience to strengthen yourself. You might want to think of psychological trauma as a physical injury that leaves you with scars that will, from time to time, be uncomfortable.

What other problems might I have after a traumatic experience?

Major depression is a common problem following exposure to trauma. It is characterized by a consistently depressed mood and a loss of interest in daily activities. Between 30% and 80% of those with post-traumatic stress disorder will also suffer from depression. Other disorders that may occur, include: other anxiety disorders; sexual disorders; health problems (fibromyalgia, chronic pain, etc.) or substance abuse (alcohol, street drugs and prescription drugs).

I feel guilty - is this normal?

Guilt can come from the fact that you have survived while others have not, or perhaps in trying to explain your perceived role in 'inviting' an assault. Try to further examine your feelings of guilt to understand where they come from, so that you may overcome them.

This happened a long time ago but I'm only starting to develop symptoms now. Is this possible?

Someone who has experienced a traumatic event can develop symptoms of post-traumatic stress several months or even years later. The development of new symptoms may be triggered by a later event (anniversary of the event, retirement, etc.).

What is resilience?

Resilience is not only the absence of post-traumatic stress after a traumatic experience, but also an individual's ability to take something positive from adversity. An individual may display resilience to one traumatic event while developing symptoms of post-traumatic stress after another one.

What's the difference between psychologists, psychiatrists, psychoanalysts and psychotherapists?

Psychologists have a master's degree or PhD in psychology. They use psychological tests and psychotherapy with their patients. Psychiatrists are doctors that specialize in mental health. They can prescribe medication to help their patients. Some will also use psychotherapy. Psychoanalysts have had private training and a personal psychoanalysis. They help their patients to explore their unconscious using the psychoanalytical method. Anyone can call themselves a psychotherapist; no formal training or methods are required.

Where can I get help?

You may find out where to get help from the police or from your lawyer. Judicial or psychological consultations may help you. You can also find a list of organizations that may help you on the info-trauma.org website, under the section designated for victims of traumatic events.

Taking care of yourself:

Do not isolate yourself

There is probably someone among your friends and family who can listen to you and help. Studies have shown that people with post-traumatic stress who have a strong support network are more likely to see an improvement in their symptoms.

Seek the help that is available to you

Make use of the services that are available to you: a doctor, mental health specialist, victim support services, etc. Self-help groups (where you can talk with others who have shared similar experiences to yours) can be helpful. If it is part of your daily life, spirituality may also help you.

Alcohol, tobacco, drugs and medication

These will aggravate your symptoms, even if they appear to offer comfort at first. If you think you may need medication you should consult your doctor.

Do not avoid talking about the event

Accept any intrusive thoughts about the traumatic event, rather than trying to avoid them. Avoidance is known a means of controlling the symptoms of post-traumatic stress. However, avoiding the things that trigger unpleasant thoughts about the event actually prevents such thoughts from gradually fading.

Devoting time to thinking and talking about the traumatic event and how it has affected you (with healthcare professionals, friends or volunteers, for example) and giving yourself time for rest and relaxation is a constructive way of managing intrusive thoughts.

Try and resume your routines and activities

Try to resume your normal routines and activities where possible, as soon as you are able to. Individuals suffering from traumatic stress tend to abandon social and work-related activities that serve to provide structure and meaning to their day.

Try to accept your symptoms

The strength of your suffering may take you by surprise, but this is caused largely by what you have been through. The best way of overcoming intrusive thoughts about the trauma is to accept them - even if they are difficult to tolerate - and then to let them go.

Learn about post-traumatic stress

Try to learn more what you are experiencing. The aim is not to become an expert on your condition, but rather to know more about your symptoms so that you can be better equipped to overcome them.

You can find further information on post-traumatic stress disorder on the info-trauma.org website.