

Understanding and Responding to Trauma

What is trauma?

Trauma is an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening. It also has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

Examples can include:

- Child abuse and neglect
- Partner violence
- Rape or sexual assault
- Violent crime
- Family problems such as substance abuse
- Extreme poverty or homelessness
- Car accident
- Natural disaster
- War combat
- Medical procedure

What are the consequences of trauma exposure?

Trauma can lead to the following negative reactions that can affect daily living:

- Feeling tense, anxious, jumpy, always on alert
- Feeling sad, uninterested, lonely, tired, and numb
- Crying a lot
- Having negative thoughts about oneself or life in general
- Blaming oneself for trauma
- Having nightmares or flashbacks about the trauma
- Thinking constantly about the trauma
- Feeling angry or agitated
- Avoiding people or places

If these reactions persist, they can cause serious health problems such as the following:

- Physical health
 - Persistent pain such as headaches or stomachaches
 - Frequent sickness
- Mental health
 - Posttraumatic stress
 - Depression and anxiety
- Behavioral health
 - Alcohol and substance abuse
 - Unhealthy eating habits

Trauma not only leads to health-related problems, but it can also cause problems in daily life such as:

- Conflict with family and friends
- Problems with parenting
- Anger and violence
- Work problems
- Money problems
- Additional trauma exposure

What helps?

There are proven strategies that help individuals and families adapt to and recover from trauma.

1. Social Support

Strong social support, or connecting with people who care, is the number one predictor of resilience to trauma. Reaching out for support and providing support to others can help trauma recovery. Volunteering or joining a trauma recovery group can be helpful.

2. Self-Care

Taking care of yourself after experiencing trauma can make recovery possible and prevent future traumas. Self-care includes healthy lifestyle choices such as eating a balanced diet and exercising regularly. Calming the mind through relaxation or mindfulness is also beneficial, as is establishing a healthy sleep routine.

3. Professional Counseling

Counselors have become very good at addressing trauma over the past 10 to 20 years, and there are many effective treatments available. Good therapists not only use effective treatment approaches, but they also assure that clients feel comfortable and safe. For many, trauma-focused counseling can reduce negative reactions and health-related problems while enhancing personal outlook and quality of life.

What resources can I access to help myself or others?

Institute for Child and Family Well-Being - <https://uwm.edu/icfw/>

Crisis and Trauma Resource Institute - <https://us.ctrinstitute.com/>

Trauma Resources International - <https://traumaresourcesinternational.org/>

International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies - <https://istss.org/home>

Containment exercise or breathing retraining (EBP)

- Inhale normal breath through nose
- Slowly exhale through nose while silently repeating calming term
- Pause for count of 4 between breaths (can be less)
- Give instructions, model, then coach
(Coffey, Schumacher, Brimo, & Brady, 2005; Foa & Rothbaum, 1998)