

## Understanding and Responding to Trauma

### What is trauma?

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

Examples can include, but is *not* limited to:

- Child abuse and neglect
- Intimate partner violence
- Substance use by a close loved one
- Sexual assault
- Violent crime
- Poverty or homelessness
- Car accidents
- Natural disasters
- War/combat
- Medical procedure

### Individual Consequences of Trauma Exposure

Humans respond to trauma in ways that affect daily living:

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

If these reactions persist, they can cause serious negative, long-term health outcomes such as:

#### Physical Health

- Cancer
- Autoimmune disorders
- Frequent illness
- Unplanned pregnancy

#### Mental Health

- Posttraumatic stress
- Anxiety, depression, inattention
- Reduced trust in others

## Behavioral Health

- Difficulty regulating emotions
- Thrill seeking
- Alcohol and drug use
- Unhealthy eating habits
- Reduced enjoyment of meeting new people

## Social Health

- Conflict with family and friends
- Problems with parenting
- Absenteeism from work or school
- Economic instability
- Additional trauma exposure

## What Helps?

Several proven strategies help individuals, families and communities adapt and recover after trauma.

### 1. Social Connectedness

Strong social connection, or connecting with people who care, is the number one predictor of resilience to trauma. Reaching out for connection and connecting with 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, getting enough sleep and resting. Calming or activating the mind based on need can be beneficial.

### 3. Professional Counseling

Therapies for trauma are advancing each year, especially over the last 20 years. Good therapists assure that people feel comfortable and safe and use effective treatment approaches. For many, trauma-focused counseling is difficult *and* can reduce unpleasant symptoms and health-related outcomes while enhancing personal outlook and quality of life.

## Resources that Might Help

Trauma is common. Prevention measures that address economic stress and social connection of parents and caregivers have near-term and long-term benefits to individuals, families and the community. To learn more about prevention, visit [www.uwm.edu/icfw](http://www.uwm.edu/icfw).

Crisis and Trauma Resource – <https://ctrinstitute.com/resources/>

Multilingual Trauma Resources – <https://childmind.org/guide/multilingual-trauma-resources/>

International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies – <https://istss.org/clinical-resources/child-adolescent-trauma-assessments/>

## Try these to regulate your nervous system

### Breath work

- Inhale slowly through your nose
- Pause for a count of 4 or less
- Exhale even slower through your mouth
  - Try thinking a calming mantra like “loosen,” “calm, or “I’m okay.”
- Repeat for several rounds

### Imagery

- Imagine a container, describe it in detail
- Imagine the inside and the lid
- Imagine putting your upsetting thoughts, feeling, memories into the container
- Close lid and tell yourself you will return to the container when you can
- Gently close and find a place to “store it” safely