

Coping with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

What is PTSD? Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to an experience in which there was the potential for serious physical harm or death. Examples of traumatic events include military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, spousal abuse, child abuse/neglect, automobile accidents, and violent assaults. PTSD is distinguished from “normal” remembering of stressful events because it is persistent, creates emotional distress, and disrupts functioning in daily life.

A person with PTSD has three main types of symptoms:

Re-experiencing the traumatic event. Experiencing the same mental, emotional, and physical experiences that occurred during or just after the trauma. Such as: Unexpected and distressing memories of the event or flashbacks (feeling as if the event were happening again while awake); Nightmares consisting of the event or other frightening images; Exaggerated emotional and physical reactions to triggers that remind the person of the event.

Avoidance and emotional numbing. Avoiding reminders of the trauma. Survivors may or may not realize that their behaviors can be motivated by the need to avoid reminders of the trauma. Avoidance is indicated by: Extensive avoidance of activities, places, thoughts, feelings, or conversations related to the traumatic event; Feeling detached from others; Loss of interest in activities that used to be enjoyable; Restricted emotions; Shutting down emotionally or feeling emotionally numb; Trouble having loving feelings or feeling any strong emotions; Losing interest in things you used to enjoy doing.

Increased arousal. Physical reactions to trauma reminders such as: Trouble sleeping; Difficulty concentrating or remembering information; Irritability, feeling agitated, or outbursts of anger; Feeling hypervigilant or on-guard, constantly on the lookout for danger; Getting startled by loud noises or someone touching you when you are not expecting it; Feeling shaky and sweaty; Having your heart pound and/or having trouble breathing.

What trauma survivors need to know

- Many people have problems following exposure to trauma and traumas happen to many competent, healthy, strong, good people.
- People who react to traumas are **not** going crazy. Their symptoms and problems are connected with having a traumatic experience.
- Having symptoms after a traumatic event is **not** a sign of personal weakness. Many psychologically well-adjusted and physically healthy people develop PTSD.
- When a person understands trauma symptoms better, he or she can become less fearful of them and better able to manage them.
- Active coping makes you begin to feel less helpless. Active coping means recognizing and accepting the impact of trauma on your life and taking direct action to improve things. Active coping is an attitude and a habit that can be strengthened.
- Some amount of continued reaction to the traumatic event(s) is normal and reflects a normal body and mind. Healing doesn't mean forgetting traumatic experiences or having no emotional pain when thinking about them.
- Healing may mean fewer symptoms, symptoms that are less disturbing, greater confidence in your ability to cope with your memories and reactions, or an improved ability to manage your emotions.

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Behaviors that DON'T Help - behaviors you should **not** use to cope.

- Using drugs or alcohol to reduce anxiety, relax, stop thinking about the traumatic experience, or to go to sleep. Substance use causes more problems than it cures.
- Keeping away from other people. Social isolation means loss of support, friendship, and closeness with others, and more time to worry or feel hopeless and alone.
- Dropping out of pleasurable or recreational activities. This leads to fewer opportunities to feel good and feel a sense of achievement.
- Using anger to control others. Anger helps to keep others away often preventing positive connections and/or help from loved ones.
- Trying to constantly avoid people, places, or thoughts that are reminders of the traumatic event. Avoiding thoughts about the trauma or treatment doesn't keep away distress, and it prevents you from making progress on reducing your arousal associated with stress reactions.
- Working all the time to try to avoid distressing memories of the trauma –this can lead to isolation.

Behaviors that CAN Help - There are many ways you **can** cope with posttraumatic stress.

Practicing relaxation methods -These can include muscular relaxation exercises, breathing exercises, meditation, swimming, stretching, yoga, prayer, listening to quiet music, spending time in nature, and so on. While relaxation techniques can be helpful, they can sometimes increase distress by focusing attention on disturbing physical sensations or by reducing contact with the external environment. Be aware that while uncomfortable physical sensations may become more apparent when you are relaxed, in the long run, continuing with relaxation in a way that is tolerable (i.e., interspersed with music, walking, or other activities) helps reduce negative reactions to thoughts, feelings, and perceptions.

Increasing positive distracting activities - Positive recreational or work activities often help to distract a person from his or her memories and reactions. Artistic endeavors have also been a way for many trauma survivors to express their feelings in a positive, creative way. This can improve your mood, limit the harm caused by PTSD, and help you rebuild your life. It is important to emphasize that distraction alone is unlikely to facilitate recovery; active, direct coping with traumatic events and their impact is also important.

Talking to another person for support - When survivors are able to talk about their problems with others, something helpful often results. Of course, survivors must choose their support people carefully and clearly ask for what they need. With support from others, survivors may feel less alone, feel supported or understood, or receive concrete help with a problematic situation. Often, it is best to talk to professional counselors about issues related to the traumatic experience itself; they may be more likely than friends or family to understand trauma and its effects. It is also helpful to seek support from a support group. Being in a group with others who have PTSD may help reduce one's sense of isolation, rebuild trust in others, and provide an important opportunity to contribute to the recovery of other survivors of trauma.

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Here are some things you can do if you have any of the following symptoms:

Unwanted distressing memories, images, or thoughts

- Remind yourself that they are memories, that it's natural to have some memories of the traumatic event(s).
- Talk about them to someone you trust.
- Remember that, although reminders of trauma can feel overwhelming, they often lessen with time.

Sudden feelings of anxiety or panic

These are a common part of traumatic stress reactions and include sensations of your heart pounding and feeling lightheaded or faint (usually caused by rapid breathing). If this happens, remember that:

- Remember that these reactions are not necessarily dangerous. If you had them while exercising, they probably would not worry you.
- Monitor negative thoughts. Often, it is the addition of inaccurate frightening thoughts (e.g., I'm going to die, I'm having a heart attack, I will lose control) that makes them especially upsetting.
- Slow down your breathing and use proper relaxation techniques.
- Remind yourself that the sensations will pass soon.

By thinking about your arousal/anxious reactions in these positive ways, you work toward making them happen less frequently. Practice will make it easier to cope.

Feeling like the trauma is happening again (flashbacks)

- Keep your eyes open. Look around you and notice where you are.
- Remind yourself where you are and that you are safe. The trauma happened in the past, and you are in the present.
- Get up and move around. Have a drink of water and wash your hands.
- Call someone you trust and tell them what is happening.
- Remind yourself that this is a common traumatic stress reaction.
- Tell your counselor or doctor about the flashback(s).

Trauma-related dreams and nightmares

- If you awaken from a nightmare in a panic, remind yourself that you are reacting to a dream and that's why you are anxious/aroused, not because there is real danger now.
- Consider getting up out of bed, regrouping, and orienting yourself.
- Engage in a pleasant, calming activity (e.g., listen to soothing music).
- Talk to someone if possible.
- Talk to your doctor about your nightmares.

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Difficulty falling or staying asleep

- Keep to a regular bedtime schedule.
- Avoid strenuous exercise for the few hours just before going to bed.
- Avoid using your sleeping area for anything other than sleeping or sexual intimacies.
- Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine. These harm your ability to sleep.
- Do not lie in bed thinking or worrying. After 15 minutes, get up and enjoy something soothing or pleasant; read a calming book, drink a glass of warm milk, or do something boring.

Irritability, anger, and rage

- Take a time out to cool off or think things over. Walk away from the situation.
- Get in the habit of exercising daily. Exercise reduces body tension and helps get the anger out in a positive and productive way.
- Remember that staying angry doesn't work. It actually increases your stress and can cause health problems.
- Take classes in anger management.
- If you blow up at family members or friends, find time as soon as you can to talk to them about it. Let them know how you feel and what you are doing to cope with your reactions.

Difficulty concentrating

- Slow down. Give yourself time to focus on what it is you need to learn or do.
- Write things down. Making to do lists may be helpful.
- Break tasks down into small do-able chunks.
- Plan a realistic number of events or tasks for each day.
- Monitor your feelings; many people who are depressed have trouble concentrating. Again, this is something you can discuss with your counselor, doctor, or someone close to you.

Having difficulty feeling or expressing positive emotions

- Remember that this is a common reaction to trauma, that you are not doing this on purpose, and that you should not feel guilty for something you did not want to happen and could not control.
- Make sure to regularly participate in activities that you enjoy or used to enjoy. Sometimes, these activities can rekindle feelings of pleasure.
- Take steps to communicate your caring to family or friends in little ways: write a card, leave a small gift, or phone someone and say hello.

Seek additional help - Sometimes PTSD symptoms worsen and ordinary efforts at coping don't seem to work. It is important to reach out and contact a therapist or counselor for more intensive services.