

Helping Patients Cope With A Traumatic Event



What Is a Traumatic Event?

An event, or series of events, that causes moderate to severe stress reactions, is called a traumatic event. Traumatic events are characterized by a sense of horror, helplessness, serious injury, or the threat of serious injury or death. Traumatic events affect survivors, rescue workers, and friends and relatives of victims who have been directly involved. In addition to potentially affecting those who suffer injuries or loss. They may also affect people who have witnessed the event either firsthand or on television. Stress reactions immediately following a traumatic event are very common, however, most of the reactions will resolve within ten days.

Common Responses to a Traumatic Event

Cognitive	Emotional	Physical	Behavioral
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> poor concentration confusion disorientation indecisiveness shortened attention span memory loss unwanted memories difficulty making decisions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> shock numbness feeling overwhelmed depression feeling lost fear of harm to self and/or loved ones feeling nothing feeling abandoned uncertainty of feelings volatile emotions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> nausea lightheadedness dizziness gastro-intestinal problems rapid heart rate tremors headaches grinding of teeth fatigue poor sleep pain hyperarousal jumpiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> suspicion irritability arguments with friends and loved ones withdrawal excessive silence inappropriate humor increased/decreased eating change in sexual desire or functioning increased smoking increased substance use or abuse

How Do You Interact with Patients after a Traumatic Event?

The clinician should be alert to the various needs of the traumatized person.

- Listen and encourage patients to talk about their reactions when they feel ready.
- Validate the emotional reactions of the person. Intense, painful reactions are common responses to a traumatic event.
- De-emphasize clinical, diagnostic, and pathological language.
- Communicate, person to person rather than “expert” to “victim,” using straightforward terms.

What Can You Do to Help Patients Cope with a Traumatic Event?

Explain that their symptoms may be normal, especially right after the traumatic event, and then encourage patients to:

- Identify concrete needs and attempt to help. Traumatized persons are often preoccupied with concrete needs (e.g., How do I know if my friends made it to the hospital?).
- Keep to their usual routine.
- Help identify ways to relax.
- Face situations, people and places that remind them of the traumatic event— not to shy away.
- Take the time to resolve day-to-day conflicts so they do not build up and add to their stress.
- Identify sources of support including family and friends. Encourage talking about their experiences and feelings with friends, family, or other support networks (e.g. clergy and community centers).

Who Is at Risk for Severe and Longer Lasting Reactions to Trauma?

Some people are at greater risk than others for developing sustained and long-term reactions to a traumatic event including disorders such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and generalized anxiety. Factors that contribute to the risk of long-term impairment such as PTSD are listed.

- Proximity to the event. Closer exposure to actual event leads to greater risk (dose-response phenomenon).
- Multiple stressors. More stress or an accumulation of stressors may create more difficulty.
- History of trauma.
- Meaning of the event in relation to past stressors. A traumatic event may activate unresolved fears or frightening memories.
- Persons with chronic medical illness or psychological disorders.

What Can You Do to Treat Patients in Response to a Traumatic Event?

Helping survivors of traumatic events, their family members, and emergency rescue personnel requires preparation, sensitivity, assertiveness, flexibility and common sense.

- Refer patients to a mental health professional in your area who has experience treating the needs of survivors of traumatic events.
- Provide education to help people identify symptoms of anxiety, depression, and PTSD (see resources).
- Offer clinical follow-up when appropriate, including referrals to mental health professionals.

Resources for help and information

American Red Cross focuses on meeting people's immediate emergency needs after a disaster, providing shelter, food, and physical and mental health services. They also feed emergency workers, handle inquiries from concerned family members outside the disaster area, provide blood and blood products to disaster victims, and help those affected connect with other resources.

<http://www.redcross.org/services/disaster>

Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA) informs the public, healthcare professionals and legislators that anxiety disorders are real, serious and treatable. The ADAA promotes early diagnosis and treatment of anxiety disorders, and works to improve the lives of the people who suffer from them. <http://www.adaa.org/index.cfm>

National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (NCPTSD) is part of the Department of Veterans Affairs. They work to improve the clinical care and social welfare of America's veterans through research, education, and training in the science, diagnosis, and treatment of PTSD and stress-related disorders. NCPTSD works with many different agencies and groups including veterans and their families, government policymakers, scientists and researchers, doctors and psychiatrists, journalists, and the public. This website is provided as an educational resource for PTSD and other consequences of traumatic stress. <http://www.ncptsd.org>

National Institute on Mental Health (NIMH) is part of the U.S. government's National Institutes of Health. NIMH is responsible for research on mental health and mental disorders, and the mental health consequences of and interventions after disasters and acts of mass violence. <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Alliance is comprised of professional and advocacy organizations that provide educational resources to individuals diagnosed with PTSD and their loved ones; those at risk for developing PTSD; and medical, healthcare and other professionals. <http://www.ptsdalliance.org> (877) 507-PTSD

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency (SAMHSA) is the lead mental health services agency of the Department of Health and Human Services. SAMHSA helps assess mental health needs and mental health training for disaster workers. SAMHSA also helps arrange training for mental health outreach workers, assesses the content of applications for federal crisis counseling grant funds, and addresses worker stress issues and needs. <http://www.samhsa.gov>