



# When You Experience A Traumatic Event

## What is a Traumatic Event?

If you were threatened with death or bodily harm, or witnessed the death or bodily harm of another person, or at least the threat of it, you have experienced a traumatic event.

## Traumatic Stress Symptoms

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. were traumatic events that produced abnormal stress for millions of people. Many people suffered psychological effects from the attacks for months, even those who were not nearby.

Common stress reactions to traumatic events include changes in appetite and digestive problems, difficulty sleeping, headache, anger, hyper-vigilance, suspicion, depression, crying spells, feelings of powerlessness, feeling overwhelmed, moodiness and instability, anxiety about the future, loss of concentration, worry, withdrawal from others, nightmares, and more.

## Managing Traumatic Stress

Just like a physical injury that should receive treatment, studies show that traumatic stress should be managed to prevent harmful effects on health and well being. If stress symptoms merge or linger after a traumatic event, and you deny their existence or minimize their importance, you increase the risk of an acute stress reaction and even illness.

## PTSD: The Stress Illness

Fortunately, most people recover from traumatic stress symptoms, but some do not. These people may incur Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a debilitating illness that follows a traumatic event. It is diagnosed when stress symptoms persist for more than one month after the event. PTSD can adversely affect your personal life and job functioning.

## PTSD: The Symptoms

The following are some of the key symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder:

1. Unwanted or uncontrollable memories of the traumatic event that may include thoughts, sounds, and images.
2. Disturbing dreams about the traumatic event.
3. Periodically feeling as though the traumatic event is still being experienced by re-living it in detail, or having flashbacks.
4. Intense anxiety when you are reminded of the traumatic event by something unrelated directly to the event.
5. Avoiding thoughts, feelings, or conversation with others who want to talk about the event.
6. Avoiding activities or persons that remind you of the event.
7. Lost sequence concerning significant parts of the event.
8. Emotionally numb sensations - being unable to experience certain feelings, especially those associated with vulnerability such as love, or intimacy with a significant other.
9. Sleep problems.
10. Difficulty managing anger, and feeling more anger than a specific event should incite.
11. Problems concentrating.
12. Often feeling "jumpy" or easily startled.

## Preventing PTSD

Avoiding PTSD is more likely when victims talk about their experience, especially with fellow victims. One-on-one counseling can also be helpful, but group work is especially effective. This is called a "critical incident stress debriefing (CISD)." Participate in such a group if it is offered. The assault on your brain by images and information from a traumatic event triggers the release of powerful brain chemicals that manage stress. This is normal, but a CISD helps prevent Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that can result from your brain's response to stress. A CISD will also help you return to a normal "pre-trauma" state much more quickly.

## Do's and Don'ts

*After a traumatic event, do:*

1. Exercise the body.
2. Talk about the event with others.
3. Ask for help, if you need it.
4. Try to keep a normal schedule.
5. Rest, and drink plenty of liquids.
6. Eat well balanced meals.

*After a traumatic event, don't:*

1. Label your reactions as "crazy."
2. Make sudden life changes.
3. Isolate yourself from others.
4. Drink alcohol to feel better.
5. Tell yourself to "snap out of it."
6. Block out thoughts of the event.

## What the EAP Can Do

The EAP can help you work through the traumatic event by evaluating the effects of the event on your life and can offer suggestions and strategies about how to bounce back.

Traumatic events may include accidents and close calls, natural disasters, sexual assault, past childhood sexual abuse, and many forms of victimization. The EAP can also discuss traumatic stress symptoms with you and provide more information about other resources and counseling help.

