



# Managing PTSD and Trauma Symptoms

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## What Is Trauma?



When we speak about trauma, we are talking about serious events that threaten the lives of survivors and cause lasting, ongoing, and real disruption in their relationships, functioning, work/school, or finances. Traumas can be a single episode, such as a natural disaster, or ongoing, such as domestic violence or childhood sexual abuse. Trauma will have an impact on the lives of every survivor. Approximately 1 in 3 trauma survivors will develop PTSD, while more will develop other related disorders, such as adjustment disorders, dissociative disorders, or depression. Most survivors will eventually recover, given time and support.

Traumatic experiences are more common than you might think. Studies show that 9-44% of women have experienced domestic violence. Natural disasters have been experienced by roughly 19% of men and 15% of women. Virtually all combat veterans have experienced trauma. If you have experienced trauma, you are

not alone.

Trauma, especially repeated or prolonged trauma, can affect the brain. Brain structure and brain function can both experience changes due to trauma. There is evidence to suggest that these changes may differ based on the survivor's age at the time of the trauma. Stress hormones, such as Cortisol, may become elevated, and the body may become more sensitive to the effects of these hormones. Brain structures that process memory and regulate emotional responses to memories may become damaged or stunted in development. Interestingly, effective trauma treatment has been shown to reverse some of this damage.

If you, or someone you love, has experienced a serious event, understand that emotional, thinking, and behavior changes are normal responses. While these often resolve over time, sometimes they can persist. Early treatment can help prevent trauma experiences from leading to PTSD.

## Fast Facts

While roughly **70%** of the population has experienced at least one traumatic event, **only 20%** go on to develop a clinical post-trauma disorder. **5%** of the total population has a PTSD diagnosis.

Scientists don't know why some people develop PTSD while others do not. It is believed that there is likely a combination of genetic, biological, personality, and social support factors involved. What is certain, however, is that **PTSD is not caused by personal weakness, nor lack of discipline.**

Treatment for trauma disorders is available and effective. **The best treatment involves a combination of psychotherapy (counseling) and medications.** Medication is not expected to be a lifelong need.

Families of trauma survivors often need support as well. Managing the emotional intensity of trauma experiences is equally as challenging for supporters. Learning about trauma and joining an online or in-person support group can be very helpful.

**Trauma survivors are not "crazy."** Their reactions and behavior makes sense given their context and experiences. Even difficult behavior, such as yelling, substance abuse, or reactivity often has a very real protective function.

## Evidence-Based Trauma Treatment

This pamphlet provides tools to manage your symptoms. However, psychotherapy is invaluable to trauma recovery. Here is a brief overview of psychotherapies proven to help.

**CBT** Cognitive Behavioral Therapy focuses on changing a person's thoughts and expectations. As beliefs change, behavior and emotional change often results. CBT is used for many disorders, and specific PTSD CBT treatment is a primary treatment for veterans.

**EMDR** is a popular treatment with some research support, although questions remain about how and why the techniques work. EMDR involves actively reprocessing bodily reactions with a therapist while engaging in eye or hand movements.

**Seeking Safety** is a highly effective form of group therapy that treats substance abuse and trauma at the same time. Group members often form lasting support networks.

**Narrative Therapy** is a person-centered form of psychotherapy where the client is encouraged to understand themselves and their story in a broader and richer context. Narrative therapists help people organize and make sense of their experiences, and find a path forwards.

## Substance Abuse & Trauma

**Trauma experiences are incredibly common for people with substance abuse issues. Studies show that up to 80% of women with substance abuse issues report life histories of assault or violence. Other studies have shown that 59% of adolescents who have experienced trauma go on to develop a substance abuse problem later in life.**

Alcohol, cocaine, opiates, marijuana, and even prescription drugs like Xanax can be abused. Substance use becomes a problem when a person finds themselves using more than they intended, has difficulty stopping, and the use interferes with their relationships, work, or finances. Once a person is physically dependent on substances, they may need inpatient medical care to safely detox, as some withdrawals, such as alcohol and benzodiazepines (tranquilizers

like Xanax and Klonopin) can be fatal.

Trauma and substance abuse can have a reciprocal relationship. While survivors often use to avoid experiencing flashbacks or anxiety, over time use actually tends to worsen these symptoms, not help them. Worse, many survivors find themselves in further traumatic situations in the process of obtaining or using substances.

Historically, substance abuse treatment and mental health treatment were considered separate, but that has begun to change. Some programs, such as Seeking Safety, have been developed to treat both problems at the same time. This reduces the risk of relapse, and helps prevent the trauma survivor from becoming overwhelmed while early in recovery.



### Trauma Symptoms

Every trauma and survivor is unique, and likewise trauma symptoms can vary widely. There is no "right" or "normal" way to respond to trauma. Some people have strong responses early, others may have delayed responses to the impact. Here are some common early and later reactions to trauma.

#### Early Responses

- Difficulty sleeping or oversleeping
- Feelings of shock, overwhelm, things suddenly "don't make sense."
- Difficulty working or feeling the need to overwork
- Feeling "unclean," dirty, or physically uncomfortable
- Feeling like you can't relax

- Afraid to be left alone

#### Later Responses

- Over-reacting to small challenges
- Irritability and sudden mood changes
- Nightmares and insomnia
- Feeling like you can't get close to other people, feeling alienated or "different"
- Recurrent episodes of things seeming unreal, like a movie, or like you are watching the world through glass
- Hypervigilance or being "on guard" much of the time
- Avoiding reminders of the event, having intrusive memories of your experience

#### Risk Factors for Developing PTSD

- Having a history of prior traumatic experiences





## Grounding

**Grounding is simply a term for calming your body's reaction to anxiety, sometimes called feeling "blank" or "spinning out."** When we get caught up in those feelings, our brain is stuck in an endless feedback loop of adrenaline and norepinephrine. Focusing on our fears and "what if.." thoughts only fuels this chemical reaction. Remember, not all thoughts need to be followed. Sometimes, we can just let them go by like leaves on a river.

**If you get distracted while trying these, that's OK. Just come back to the exercise again. No matter how many times you get distracted and have to come back, keep going for the full time. Every time you do these, you will notice you can stay in the moment a little bit**

more.

Here are some grounding exercises to try:

- **5-4-3-2-1 Sense Countdown.** Find and focus on 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste, right now, wherever you are. Really allow yourself to experience these senses.
- **Head, Shoulders, Knees, Toes.** Focus on the sensations of your feet in your socks. Really feel the contact they make with the floor. Notice your knees against the chair, or the way they feel bending and straightening if you are standing. Feel your shirt against your shoulders, notice any differences against your skin as you stretch your arms and move. Observe how the air feels on your face, the weight of your glasses on your ears and nose, your hair against your neck. Set a timer on your

phone and focus on these sensations for 3-5 minutes.

- **Animal, Vegetable, Mineral.** Think of 10 examples of each category. Too easy? Try 10 types of pets, 10 gemstones, or 10 salad veggies.

- **Shine One Corner of The World.** Organize or clean a small area for 5-10 minutes. Just your desk. Just the cat box. Just those dishes in the sink. Just 10 minutes.

How did it go? If you are having an especially difficult day, consider setting a timer for every hour, and doing a grounding exercise to gradually and consistently "dial down" your bodily anxiety.

- Few friends or supports
- Social difficulties such as poverty, unemployment, discrimination, homelessness
- History of mental illness or substance abuse

### **Protective Factors that Reduce PTSD Risk**

- Single trauma event
- Having support group, whether formal or friends and family
- Having a positive and consistent life role outside of trauma (work, caregiver, etc.)
- Having good pre-existing coping skills.
- Ability to "make sense" of the event, see it as one part of a larger life story.

## Important Reminders

No matter how much you or your loved one struggles with trauma, remember **the person is not the problem, the problem is the problem.** The problem is the trauma they experienced, and their behaviors are their way of keeping themselves safe or managing the intense feelings they are carrying.

Self-care is critical to recovery and maintaining good mental health and relationships. Self-care isn't just about warm baths and treating yourself, establishing small daily good habits is even more important. This is sometimes called "boring self care." A regular routine, including a sleep schedule that is consistent even on the weekends, will help keep you on an even keel. If you get caught up in external demands, **set alarms on your phone to eat, sleep, and even have a half hour a day of quiet time without any electronics.**

**You are doing a great job.** When recovery is slow, or even appears stalled, it is easy to feel defeated. Remember, every day that you survive is a victory. Even small things, like reading this pamphlet or reaching out, can be big steps towards recovering.

# Resources

## Recovery from trauma *is* possible.

Finding a therapist to help you process your experiences and recover from trauma can be very important. In addition to local mental health centers, consider asking your primary care doctor for a therapist referral. Most health insurance companies offer free therapist connection by calling the number on your insurance card. Often local universities and graduate schools have low-cost clinics with student therapists. A benefit to accessing these clinics is that they typically utilize the most current research, and all graduate students are directly supervised by licensed clinicians, giving you the benefit of two therapist perspectives.

Here are some further ways to access supports.

Speak with your primary care physician. They may be able to expedite referrals, and can prescribe proper medications for depression and other symptoms.

Consider getting a workbook for mood and trauma recovery. A wide variety are available at libraries and bookstores. While no substitute for a therapist, they may help you gain insight into your experiences and practice tools to manage symptoms.

There are a number of places online where you can get free and immediate supports. BetterHelp, Teladoc, and MDLive offer the ability to see licensed mental health professionals from your home, often covered by insurance. 7 Cups of Tea allows you to chat with peer volunteers about concerns. The Icarus Project runs an online forum for mutual support. Faces and Voices of Recovery offers numerous resources for folks with substance abuse, as well as mental health, concerns.

Getting help can be difficult. Finding the energy and strength to face difficulties can be overwhelming. It can be very disappointing if the first or second resource you access doesn't work out as you hoped. The results of your efforts are worth it. Your relationships are worth it. And **you** are worth it.

## Links

BetterHelp- <http://www.betterhelp.com>

TelaDoc- <http://www.teladoc.com>

MDLive- <http://www.MDLive.com>

7 Cups of Tea- <https://www.7cups.com/>

Icarus Project- <http://www.theicarusproject.net>

Faces and Voices of Recovery- <https://facesandvoicesofrecovery.org/>

Out of the Storm- <http://www.outofthestorm.website/>

Guide to Helping Loved Ones- <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/helping-someone-with-ptsd.htm>



## Learn More....

**If you are looking to learn more about trauma, PTSD, and recovery, here are some great online and print resources. Many of the books listed may also be available at your library.**

Schiraldi, Glen (2016). *The Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Sourcebook, Revised and Expanded Second Edition*. An excellent source of information and powerful tools to manage trauma.

van der Kolk, Bessel (2015). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. This book is by a true expert in the field, and gives an indepth understanding of the processes of trauma.

Schwartz, Arielle (2017). *The Complex PTSD Workbook: A Mind-Body Approach to Regaining Emotional Control and Becoming Whole*. A great resource to learn new skills.

Information for veterans and programs can be found at: <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/where-to-get-help.asp>

PTSD United is an online support network for trauma survivors and their families. <http://www.ptsdunited.org>

NIMH is a clearinghouse of information, resources, and connections for those with PTSD. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>

Information on Brain Changes from Trauma. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3181836/>