

Coping with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

•Understanding the signs•Coping and finding help•Ways to find additional help•Getting support from loved ones•Painful anniversaries•Self-care strategies

A traumatic event can trigger intense, emotional reactions. Depending on the type, severity, and duration of these reactions, a licensed professional such as a doctor or psychologist may make a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Understanding PTSD and the ways to cope with it can help people recover.

Understanding the signs

After a traumatic event, many people feel a flood of emotions like shock, fear, sadness, or disbelief. They may also feel alone or just "different" from other people.

These reactions and others are normal and may come and go for weeks or months, or, in some cases, years. However, when they don't ease with time, they can be a sign that you may have developed PTSD. The following are common symptoms that you may experience if you are suffering from PTSD:

Shock and denial. This may manifest in you feeling detached from your daily life, or as though you are functioning on "automatic pilot."

Anxiety and hypervigilance (being "on guard"). You may feel anxious, fear going out, or worry that you or your family are still in danger.

Depression. You may experience heightened sadness and grief. Having less energy or not enjoying activities that were once pleasurable for you are common signs of depression, as well as changes in appetite or weight. Some people may experience memory difficulties, frequent crying episodes, feelings of hopelessness, or even suicidal thoughts. (If you are having suicidal thoughts, seek professional help immediately, whether it be a doctor, a therapist, a 24-hour suicide hotline, a local crisis centre, your organization's assistance program, or an emergency room.)

Anger and irritability. You may feel "anger at the world" or toward people you usually love and trust, leading you to argue with relatives, friends, or co-workers. You may also find that you're more aggressive or having a hard time controlling your irritability.

Mood swings. You may find it difficult to control your emotions or moods. This may include feeling fine one moment and then suddenly feeling very anxious or upset, as though you're on an emotional roller coaster.

Flashbacks. You may feel as though you're reliving portions of your experience, especially if you were directly affected by a traumatic event. Flashbacks and vivid memories may come over you without warning, causing sweating and a racing heart.

Difficulty concentrating. This could be the inability to read, absorb information, or make decisions. You may even forget parts of your daily routine, such as brushing your teeth, paying your bills, or preparing meals.

Feeling guilty that you survived and others didn't. Survivor's guilt—"Why them and not me?"—is a very common reaction when a traumatic event involved a death.

Mistrust of others and the world. You may feel less secure in your relationships, for example, struggling to trust people, being suspicious of a partner, or feeling like something bad is always around the corner.

Withdrawing or wanting to be around people constantly. Experiencing either extreme can be a sign of heightened insecurity and anxiety.

Not wanting to talk about the event. You may find yourself avoiding thinking or talking about the event or dealing with reminders of it.

Changes in appetite, sleep, or other habits. Eating less or more than is healthy can be a sign of post-traumatic stress. Another sign can be changes in sex drive. You may also find that you're sleeping too much or too little, having trouble falling asleep or staying asleep, or experiencing nightmares about your experience.

Physical changes. Some physical symptoms include headaches, stomachaches, dizziness, heart palpitations, and/or shortness of breath. You may also feel shaky, panicky, tired, or have flu- or cold-like symptoms. (See your health care provider immediately if you are experiencing any physical changes.)

People who have survived a traumatic event may have many of these symptoms or just a few. And they may have them one at a time or all at once. It's important to get help if symptoms persist.

Coping and finding help

It is vital to get support to help cope with and recover from post-traumatic stress. While seeking professional help is an important part of the journey, a strong support network can also play an essential role in recovery.

It's not a sign of weakness if you have symptoms of PTSD. Be patient with yourself, and give yourself time to process what has happened.

Here are some guidelines that may help you:

Try not to compare yourself with others. Everyone reacts differently to traumatic experiences. There is no "right way" to deal with grief and loss, for example.

Avoid relying on alcohol or non-prescription drugs to cope. Alcohol is a depressant and can heighten your sadness and anxiety. Substance use may bring short-term relief from the impacts of trauma, but it can also bring negative consequences and, in some cases, lead to worsened symptoms.

Take care of yourself. Eat healthy meals, get enough rest, and try to get some exercise. Do your best to stick to familiar routines, as this can provide a greater sense of control and stability.

Write down your thoughts and feelings. Some people find that it helps to write down their thoughts and feelings, especially before they go to bed. You can also record your thoughts and feelings in a voice memo if you prefer this over writing.

Try a grounding technique if you're experiencing an intense emotion. Grounding is a coping tool used to "ground" yourself into the present moment. There are several strategies to try, including [breathing exercises](#).

Learn all you can about PTSD. A good place to begin is the [Trauma and PTSD](#) page of the Government of Canada website.

Ways to find additional help

When you are ready to start addressing what has happened to you and what you might be feeling, there are many resources you may turn to.

Look into resources created for people who survived the kind of trauma you did. If you survived a violent crime, you may want to contact the [Canadian Resource Centre for Victims of Crime \(CRCVC\)](#). Veterans and their families may want to visit the site for [Veterans Affairs Canada](#).

Consider joining a local support group. Talking with others who have had similar experiences can help, especially if you don't have supportive friends and family nearby. Support groups can also be found online as well as in person.

Seek professional help. Seek professional help if you have overwhelming feelings of sadness, anger, or despair. If your symptoms/experiences are unmanageable or you're noticing significant impacts in one or more areas of your life, consider getting support from your health care provider or call your organization's assistance program. If you or someone you love is having thoughts of suicide, call 911 or reach out to a crisis line immediately, or go to your local emergency room.

Getting support from loved ones

Talking with people you feel safe with can help you process the event more fully and feel more in control. However, share only as much as you feel comfortable sharing, and be aware that many may need professional support before being able to fully process or talk about a traumatic event. It is best to have a strong foundation of healthy coping strategies to draw from to support yourself with any difficult thoughts or emotions that come up. If the event you experienced or witnessed was publicly known, others may ask questions about it, including strangers who have heard about it from others or read about it in the media. Remember that you don't owe people a detailed explanation of what happened, especially if you don't know them well or you just don't feel like talking about your experience.

Painful anniversaries

Many people find it hard to cope with anniversaries or other reminders of a traumatic event. These occasions can trigger buried emotions, painful memories, and feelings of anxiety and fear. Symptoms of PTSD can return or start to feel stronger and more intense as the anniversary draws closer.

To cope during an anniversary or other significant date associated with a traumatic event, acknowledge that the day or preceding days may be difficult. Be proactive and find ways to make yourself as comfortable as possible at a potentially stressful time. Consider doing something that provides a sense of connection, like a remembrance activity or ritual. Ideas include planting a flower, writing a poem, or attending a religious/spiritual service. Talk with a professional if you are worried about how you will deal with the anniversary.

Self-care strategies

Here are some strategies for taking care of yourself while managing post-traumatic stress. Keep in mind that some of these ideas may not be helpful or relevant to you, depending on the nature of the event/what you experienced:

Talk with people who have had similar experiences. This can help you feel less alone and better understood.

Make time for activities that give you pleasure and help relieve stress. Ideas of helpful activities can include exercising, spending time with your pet, journaling, or going for a walk.

Visualize a place where you feel safe. Allow your mind to take you there to help ground and centre you. Put a picture of that special place at home or in your work area to serve as a calming reminder throughout the day.

Limit your exposure to the media. Ongoing news coverage of traumatic events (which may increase around the event's anniversary) can intensify your emotions.

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