

# Treatment for psychological and emotional trauma

In order to heal from psychological and emotional trauma, you must face and resolve the unbearable feelings and memories you've long avoided. Otherwise they will return again and again, unbidden and uncontrollable.

Trauma treatment and healing involves:

- Processing trauma-related memories and feelings
- Discharging pent-up “fight-or-flight” energy
- Learning how to regulate strong emotions
- Building or rebuilding the ability to trust other people

## Trauma therapy treatment approaches

Trauma disrupts the body's natural equilibrium, freezing you in a state of hyperarousal and fear. In essence, your nervous system gets stuck in overdrive. Successful trauma treatment must address this imbalance and reestablish your physical sense of safety. The following therapies are commonly used in the treatment of emotional and psychological trauma:

- **Somatic experiencing** takes advantage of the body's unique ability to heal itself. The focus of therapy is on bodily sensations, rather than thoughts and memories about the traumatic event. By concentrating on what's happening in your body, you gradually get in touch with trauma-related energy and tension. From there, your natural survival instincts take over, safely releasing this pent-up energy through shaking, crying, and other forms of physical release.
- **EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing)** incorporates elements of cognitive-behavioral therapy with eye movements or other forms of rhythmic, left-right stimulation. These back-and-forth eye movements are thought to work by “unfreezing” traumatic memories, allowing you to resolve them.
- **Cognitive-behavioral therapy** helps you process and evaluate your thoughts and feelings about a trauma. While cognitive-behavioral therapy doesn't treat the physiological effects of trauma, it can be helpful when used in addition to a body-based therapy such as somatic experiencing or EMDR.

## Emotional and psychological trauma recovery tips

Recovering from emotional and psychological trauma takes time. Give yourself time to heal and to mourn the losses you've experienced. Don't try to force the healing process. Be patient with the pace of recovery. Finally, be prepared for difficult and volatile emotions. Allow yourself to feel whatever you're feeling without judgment or guilt.

## Trauma self-help strategy 1: Don't isolate

- **Following a trauma**, you may want to withdraw from others, but isolation makes things worse. Connecting to others will help you heal, so make an effort to maintain your relationships and avoid spending too much time alone.
- **Ask for support.** It's important to talk about your feelings and ask for the help you need. Turn to a trusted family member, friend, counselor, or clergyman.
- **Participate in social activities**, even if you don't feel like it. Do "normal" things with other people, things that have nothing to do with the traumatic experience. If you've retreated from relationships that were once important to you, make the effort to reconnect.
- **Join a support group for trauma survivors.** Being with others who are facing the same problems can help reduce your sense of isolation and hearing how others cope can help inspire you.
- **Volunteer.** As well as helping others, [volunteering](#) can be a great way to challenge the sense of helplessness that often accompanies trauma. Remind yourself of your strengths and reclaim your sense of power by comforting or helping others.

## Trauma self-help strategy 2: Stay grounded

In order to stay grounded after a trauma, it helps to have a structured schedule to follow.

- **Stick to a daily routine**, with regular times for waking, sleeping, eating, working, and exercise. Make sure to schedule time for relaxing and social activities, too.
- **Break large jobs into smaller, manageable tasks.** Take pleasure from the accomplishment of achieving something, even it's a small thing.
- **Find activities that make you feel better** and keep your mind occupied (reading, taking a class, cooking, playing with your kids or pets), so you're not dedicating all your energy and attention to focusing on the traumatic experience.
- **Allow yourself to feel what you feel when you feel it.** Acknowledge your feelings about the trauma as they arise and accept them. Accepting your feelings is part of the grieving process and is necessary for healing.

## Staying grounded: A trauma self-help exercise

If you are feeling disoriented, confused, or upset, you can do the following exercise:

- Sit on a chair. Feel your feet on the ground. Press on your thighs. Feel your behind on the seat and your back against the chair.
- Look around you and pick six objects that have red or blue. This should allow you to feel in the present, more grounded, and in your body. Notice how your breath gets deeper and calmer.
- You may want to go outdoors and find a peaceful place to sit on the grass. As you do, feel how your body can be held and supported by the ground.
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## Trauma self-help strategy 3: Take care of your health

A healthy body increases your ability to cope with stress from a trauma.

- **Get plenty of sleep.** After a traumatic experience, worry or fear may disturb your sleep patterns. A lack of sleep can make your trauma symptoms worse and make it harder to maintain your emotional balance. Go to sleep and get up at the same time each day and aim for 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night.
- **Avoid alcohol and drugs** as their use can worsen your trauma symptoms and exacerbate feelings of depression, anxiety, and isolation.
- **Exercise regularly.** Regular exercise boosts serotonin, endorphins, and other feel-good brain chemicals. It also boosts self-esteem and helps to improve sleep. For maximum results, aim for 30 to 60 minutes of activity on most days.
- **Eat a well-balanced diet.** Eating small, well-balanced meals throughout the day will help you keep your energy up and minimize mood swings. While you may be drawn to sugary foods for the quick boost they provide, complex carbohydrates are a better choice. Foods rich in certain omega-3 fats—such as salmon, walnuts, soybeans, and flaxseeds—can give your mood a boost.
- **Reduce stress.** Making time for rest and relaxation will help you bring your life back into balance. Try [relaxation techniques](#) such as meditation, yoga, or deep breathing exercises. Schedule time for activities that bring you joy—favorite hobbies or activities with friends, for example.

## Helping someone deal with emotional and psychological trauma

It can be difficult to know how to help a loved one who's suffered a traumatic or distressing experience, but your support can be a crucial factor in their recovery.

- **Be patient and understanding.** Healing from emotional or psychological trauma takes time. Be patient with the pace of recovery and remember that everyone's response to trauma is different. Don't judge your loved one's reaction against your own response or anyone else's.
- **Offer practical support** to help your loved one get back into a normal routine. That may mean help with collecting groceries or housework, for example, or simply being available to talk or listen.
- **Don't pressure your loved one into talking but be available when they want to talk.** Some trauma survivors find it difficult to talk about what happened. Don't force your loved one to open up but let them know you are there to listen whenever they feel ready.
- **Help your loved one to socialize and relax.** Encourage them to participate in physical exercise, seek out friends, and pursue hobbies and other activities that bring them pleasure. Take a fitness class together or set a regular lunch date with friends.
- **Don't take the trauma symptoms personally.** Your loved one may become angry, irritable, withdrawn, or emotionally distant. Remember that this is a result of the trauma and may not have anything to do with you or your relationship.

## Helping a child recover from trauma

It's important to communicate openly with children following trauma. Let them know that it's normal to feel scared or upset. Your child may also look to you for cues on how they should respond to traumatic events so let him or her see you dealing with symptoms of trauma in a positive way.

## How children react to emotional and psychological trauma

Some common reactions to trauma and ways to help your child deal with them:

- **Regression.** Many children may try to return to an earlier stage when they felt safer and more cared for. Younger children may wet the bed or want a bottle; older children may fear being alone. It's important to be patient and comforting if your child responds this way.
- **Thinking the event is their fault.** Children younger than seven or eight tend to think that if something goes wrong, it must be their fault—no matter how irrational this may sound to an adult. Be sure your child understands that he did not cause the event.
- **Sleep disorders.** Some children have difficulty falling to sleep; others wake frequently or have troubling dreams. If you can, give your child a stuffed animal, soft blanket, or flashlight to take to bed. Try spending extra time together in the evening, doing quiet activities or reading. Be patient. It may take a while before your child can sleep through the night again.
- **Feeling helpless.** Being active in a campaign to prevent an event like this one from happening again, writing thank you letters to people who have helped, and caring for others can bring a sense of hope and control to everyone in the family.

Source: *Sidran Institute*

## Ten Steps to Healing From Trauma

By **Martin V. Cohen, Ph.D.**

Whether you have been a crime victim, involved in an accident or natural disaster, or were the victim of childhood abuse, the resulting trauma is similar. Pervasive fear and feelings of helplessness are natural reactions to events you probably had little or no control over. "I was totally traumatized," and "I thought I was going to die," are among the most often used phrases used to describe such occurrences. Unfortunately, trauma and the stress that follows, is on the rise at the turn of the new millenium in America.

Fortunately, there are ways to overcome the "aftershocks" of traumatic incidents. A cluster of symptoms consisting of (1) Persistently **REEXPERIENCING** the event (e.g., flashbacks, nightmares, etc.), (2) **AVOIDANCE** (e.g., avoiding people, places or activities that trigger memories of what happened) and (3) **HYPERAROUSAL** (e.g., jumpiness, feeling on edge, irritability, etc.) can be treated effectively with the following steps toward healing this condition.

In 22 years of practicing psychotherapy, specializing in treating trauma victims, I've seen them work.

- 1.-- Recognize that your symptoms are **normal reactions to abnormal circumstances**. Although you may feel like you are out of control or “going crazy,” in reality, you are experiencing what are called post-traumatic stress symptoms.
- 2.-- Talk about your thoughts, feeling and reactions to the events with people you trust. Then, talk about it some more. Keep talking about it until you have no need to talk about it anymore.
- 3.--Do whatever it takes to create a feeling of safety and tranquility in your immediate environment. Do you need to sleep with a night light on for awhile? Can you develop a discipline of meditation or listening to soothing music?
- 4.-- As much and as quickly as possible, resume your normal activities and routines. Traumatic events can throw your life into a state of chaos. The sooner you resume these activities and routines, the more normal your life will feel. Structure can provide feelings of security as you etch your way back to stability.
- 5.-- You are in a recovery process. Give yourself the proper rest, nutrition and exercise. If you were recovering from the flu you would not forget these health tips. Do the same for yourself as you recover from traumatic stress.
- 6.-- Take an affirmative action on your behalf. For example, if you were a victim of crime, prosecuting the perpetrator may be an empowering experience. If this is not an option for you, write in your journal. Strike out at the perpetrator with words. Take some action on your behalf.
- 7.-- Become aware of your emotional triggers and learn to cope with them creatively. You may have a flashback to your trauma by engaging in a similar activity, going to a similar place, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or feeling something that reminds you of the original trauma. One way to cope with this is to recognize that you are experiencing an emotional trigger and engage in positive self-talk (e.g., “This is frightening but I am safe now.”)
- 8.--Try to find some deeper meaning in what happened to you. True, you were victimized but you *can* become a survivor. Survivors often find that changes in their outlook on life are possible, even preferable. What have you learned from your traumatic experience? Record these insights in a journal or voice them in a support group that is sympathetic to your situation.
- 9.-- Seek therapy. Psychotherapy, particularly with a certified EMDR practitioner who specializes in trauma, is often very effective in helping people overcome the aftermath of trauma. If you can't stop thinking about what happened; if you are always feeling anxious and on guard; if you find yourself avoiding your normal routines or if you are experiencing some of the other symptoms of post-traumatic stress, you can probably benefit from professional help. The EMDR International Association can give you a referral to a certified EMDR practitioner in your area ([www.emdria.org](http://www.emdria.org)), telephone (512) 451-5200. If you were a crime victim, most states offer victims assistance to pay for psychotherapy. For more information call the National Organization

for Victim Assistance at (202) 232-6682. In California, call the Victims of Crime Program at (800) -VICTIMS (842-8467).

10.-- Be patient with yourself. Healing takes time. Your recovery will have it's ups and downs. Follow the guidelines in this article and know that you are in a recovery process that will take time.

Remember, you may have been victimized but you do not have to continue being a victim. In this unfortunate case you were rendered helpless but to continue in that status is very limiting. By following the steps outlined above, you will emerge as a survivor. Your traumatic experience can make you a stronger and wiser person. The potential is there for you to learn and grow in ways you may not have considered had the trauma never occurred

### **Recovering from Trauma ...Psychology today**

Not everyone who endures a traumatic experience is scarred by it; the human psyche has a tremendous capacity for recovery and even growth. Recovering from a traumatic experience requires that the painful emotions be thoroughly processed. Trauma feelings can not be repressed or forgotten. If they are not dealt with directly, the distressing feelings and troubling events replay over and over in the course of a lifetime, creating a condition known as post-traumatic stress disorder.

Whatever inner resources people need to mobilize for recovery, they still can not accomplish the task alone. Depression and trauma are disconnective disorders. They do not improve in isolation. To fix them you have to be connected to others.

Direct experience with disasters ranging from war and terrorism to hurricanes and earthquakes has taught me that there are four basic stages in recovering from a profound stress. Progression through all four stages is essential to recovery.

### **Stage One: Circuit-breaking**

If you overload an electrical system with too much energy and too much stimulation, the circuit breaker activates and shuts everything down. The human nervous system is also an electrical system, and when it is overloaded with too much stimulation and too much danger, as in trauma, it also shuts down to just basics. People describe it as feeling numb, in shock or dead inside.

The juice turns off. Intellectually, you lose from 50 to 90 percent of brain capacity, which is why you should never make a decision when you're "in the trauma zone." Emotionally you don't feel anything. Spiritually you're disconnected, you have a spiritual crisis or it doesn't mean anything to you at all.

Physically all your systems shut down and you run on basics. What is so intriguing is that physical symptoms that were previously prominent often disappear during this time. Back pain, migraines, arthritis, even acne often clear up. Then, when recovery from trauma is complete, the physical symptoms return.

When the system starts to recover and can handle a bit more stimulation and energy—and the human system is destined to try to recover, to seek equilibrium—feelings begin to return.

### **Stage Two: Return of Feelings**

Most people have not experienced so much primary trauma that they must see a professional counselor; they can work through their feelings by involving the people they are close to. They do it by telling their story—a hundred times. They need to talk talk talk, recount the gory details. That is the means by which they begin to dispel the feelings of distress attached to their memories.

The more that feelings can be encouraged, the better. The more you feel the more you heal.

The expression of feelings can take many forms. For most people it may be easiest to talk. But others may need to write. Or draw. However they tell their stories, the rest of us have an obligation to listen.

It is often helpful to actually revisit the scene of destruction. That allows someone who has been impacted directly to emotionally experience the event and grasp the reality of it. That direct experience can stimulate the return of feeling. Visiting the site is not for everybody, however. For some it is too disturbing. Others may need the support of loved ones to revisit the scene.

There are four broad patterns of expression of feelings that people employ in response to a crisis. Call them feeling styles. Some people consistently maintain one style; others exhibit all four styles at different times.

It is important to recognize which style of emotional expression is characteristic of your response, and which patterns your loved ones display. Each one demands a different approach.

#### *The Trickle Effect*

Feelings flow in little trickles, slow but steady. Trickleers have feelings at a low or medium level most of the time.

#### *Hit and Run Feelings*

Some people hit an emotion, experience it intensely, then find it so scary they run away from it. They avoid it and may not talk about it for days, weeks or even months. Then they hit the feeling again, it blows up and they run away from it again.

#### *Roller Coasters*

Many people go up and down emotionally. They are in touch with their feelings but their feelings are all over the place. Like a roller coaster, however, they can go very quickly through the feeling stage.

#### *Tsunamis*

Emotions come in tidal waves that are so big, comprehensive and overwhelming that those who get them feel like they're going to drown. They flail about, and then the wave recedes; they discover that they're still alive and they feel better. Tsunamis usually occur because people repress their feelings of pain.

## **Stage Three: Constructive Action**

People need to take action and make a difference even in the smallest ways. Taking action restores a sense of control and directly counteracts the sense of powerlessness that is the identifying mark of trauma.

The ways of action are many. You can write a letter to the rescue workers. You can give blood. You can make a card for those who lost loved ones. You can hang a flag if that means something to you, or donate to the Red Cross. You can feed rescue workers or collect needed supplies for them from your community. You can take in children whose families can't reach them. You can help a person who is out of control to get more grounded during the crisis.

You do whatever you can and never assume that any gesture is too small. In a situation that is overwhelming, you don't go for the big picture. You go for what is closest to you and where you can make a difference. Constructive action might be writing about the catastrophe or creating some work of art about it. It also encompasses getting back to work so that you can contribute something.

Stage Two and Stage Three go hand in hand. To go forward you feel and you act. You can't do one or the other. Acting and feeling become an engine that propels you forward.

## Stage Four: Reintegration

In the wake of crisis it is possible to learn and grow at rates 100 times faster than at any other time, because there is a door of opportunity. Growth can go at warp speed in every domain of life.

You can learn much that is deep and profound. You do this by interacting and by working together on the meaning of the difficult experience. Those who have the courage to become part of the trauma tribe, to experience and share their pain, or to help them overcome their pain, also have the opportunity to share their growth.

Everyone who goes through this process ends up better, stronger, smarter, deeper, and more connected. They would say so and everyone who comes in contact with them recognizes the change. It is like having a broken bone. If it heals properly, it is stronger in the spot where it fractured than it was before the injury.

Traumatic experiences are broken bones of the soul. If you engage in the process of recovery, you get stronger. If you don't, the bones remain porous, with permanent holes inside, and you are considerably weaker.

In this stage of recovery, you reintegrate your self and your values in a new way. You incorporate meaning in your life. You integrate deeper and more authentic ways of communicating.

People at this stage may experience a new sense of the preciousness of life, a clarification of goals and renewed commitment to them, and new understanding of the value of ties to others. But to get to stage four you have to go through the first three stages.