

## Effects of Traumatic Experiences

When suddenly faced with danger, people are sometimes overcome with feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror. These events are called traumatic experiences. Some common traumatic experiences include being physically attacked, being in a serious accident, being in combat, being sexually assaulted or being in a fire or a disaster like a hurricane or a tornado. After traumatic experiences, people may have problems they didn't have before the event. If these problems are severe and have continued over the last year, you may need help. Below is information on how traumatic experiences affect people who go through them. Remember, you can get help for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

### What are Common Basic Effects of Trauma?

Because they get overwhelmed with fear during a trauma, survivors often have particular symptoms that begin soon after the traumatic experience. The main symptoms are re-experiencing of the trauma—mentally and physically—and avoidance of trauma reminders. Together, these symptoms create a problem that is called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a specific set of problems resulting from a traumatic experience that is recognized by medical and mental health professionals.

### Re-experiencing Symptoms

Trauma survivors commonly continue re-experiencing their traumas. Re-experiencing means that the survivor continues to have the same mental, emotional, and physical experiences that occurred during or just after the trauma. This includes thinking about the trauma, seeing images of the event, feeling agitated, and having physical sensations like those that occurred during the trauma. Trauma survivors find themselves feeling and acting as if the trauma is happening again: feeling as if they are in danger, experiencing panic sensations, wanting to escape, getting angry, thinking about attacking or harming someone else. Because they are anxious and physically agitated, they may have trouble sleeping and trouble concentrating. These experiences are not usually voluntary; the survivor usually can't control them or stop them from happening. Mentally re-experiencing the trauma can include:

- Upsetting memories such as images or other thoughts about the trauma
- Feeling as if the trauma is happening again (“Flashbacks”)
- Bad dreams and nightmares
- Getting upset when reminded about the trauma (by something the person sees, hears, feels, smells, or tastes)
- Anxiety or fear—feeling in danger again
- Anger or aggressive feelings – feeling the need to defend oneself
- Trouble controlling emotions because reminders lead to sudden anxiety or anger
- Trouble concentrating or thinking clearly

People also can have **physical** reactions to trauma reminders such as:

- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Feeling agitated and constantly on the lookout for danger
- Getting very startled by loud noises or something or someone coming up on you from behind when you don't expect it
- Feeling shaky and sweaty
- Having your heart pound or having trouble breathing

Because they have these upsetting feelings, trauma survivors often act as if they are in danger when they get stressed or are reminded of their trauma. They might get overly concerned about keeping safe in situations that really aren't very dangerous. Because traumatized people often feel like they are in danger even when they aren't, they may be overly aggressive, lashing out to protect themselves when there is no need.

Although re-experiencing symptoms are unpleasant, they are a sign that the body and mind are actively trying to cope with the traumatic experience. These symptoms are automatic, learned responses to trauma reminders. It is also possible that re-experiencing symptoms are actually part of the mind's attempt to make sense of what has happened.

## Avoidance Symptoms

Because thinking about the trauma and feeling as if you are in danger is so upsetting, people who have been through traumas want to avoid reminders. Sometimes they are aware of this and avoid trauma reminders on purpose, and sometimes they do it without realizing it.

Ways of avoiding thoughts, feelings, and sensations associated with the trauma can include:

- Avoiding conversations and staying away from places, activities, or people that might remind you of trauma
- Trouble remembering important parts of what happened during the trauma
- “Shutting down” emotionally or feeling emotionally numb
- Trouble having loving feelings or feeling any strong emotions
- Feeling strange or “not yourself”
- Feeling disconnected from the world around you and things that happen to you
- Avoiding situations that might make you have a strong emotional reaction
- Feeling weird physical sensations
- Feeling physically numb
- Not feeling pain or other sensations
- Losing interest in things you used to enjoy

Avoiding thinking about trauma or avoiding treatment for your trauma-related problems may keep a person from feeling upset in the short run. But avoiding treatment of continuing trauma symptoms prevents progress on coping with trauma so that people's trauma symptoms don't go away.

## What are Common Secondary and Associated Post-Traumatic Symptoms?

**Secondary** symptoms are problems that come about because of having post-traumatic re-experiencing and avoidance symptoms. For example: because a person wants to avoid talking about a traumatic event, she might get cut off from friends and begin to feel lonely and depressed. As time passes after a traumatic experience, more and more secondary symptoms may develop. Over time, secondary symptoms can become more troubling and disabling than the original re-experiencing and avoidance symptoms.

**Associated** symptoms are problems that don't come directly from being overwhelmed with fear, but happen because of other things that were going on at the time of the trauma. For example: a person who gets psychologically traumatized in a car accident might also get physically injured and then get depressed because he can't work or leave the house.

All of these problems can be secondary or associated trauma symptoms:

- **Aggressive behavior toward oneself or others:** can happen due to frustration over the inability to control PTSD symptoms (feeling that PTSD symptoms “run your life”). It can also occur when other things that happened at the time of trauma made the person angry (the unfairness of the situation). Some people are aggressive because they grew up with people who lashed out when they were angry and never taught them how to cope with angry feelings. Because angry feelings keep people away, they also stop a person from having positive connections and getting help. Anger and aggression can cause job problems, marital and relationship problems, and loss of friendships.
- **Self-blame, guilt, and shame:** can happen when PTSD symptoms make it hard to fulfill current responsibilities. It can also happen when people fall into the common trap of second-guessing what they did or didn't do at the time of a trauma.

Many people, in trying to make sense of their experience, blame themselves. This is usually completely unfair. At best, it fails to take into account the other reasons why the events occurred. Self-blame causes a lot of distress and can prevent a person from reaching out for help. Society sometimes takes a “blame-the-victim” attitude, and this is wrong.

- **Feeling detached or disconnected from others:** can happen when a person has difficulty feeling or expressing positive feelings. After traumas, people can get wrapped up in their problems or become numb, and then stop putting energy into their relationships with friends and family.
- **Physical health symptoms and problems:** can happen because of long periods of physical agitation or arousal from anxiety. Trauma survivors may also avoid medical care because it reminds them of their trauma and causes anxiety, and this may lead to poorer health. Habits used to cope with post-traumatic stress, like alcohol use, can also cause health problems. Also, other things that happened at the time of trauma may cause health problems (for example, an injury).
- **Alcohol and/or drug abuse:** can happen when a person wants to avoid bad feelings that come with PTSD symptoms, or when other things that happened at the time of trauma lead a person to take drugs. This is a common way to cope with upsetting trauma symptoms, but it actually leads to more problems.

Although PTSD symptoms and other trauma-related problems may take up most of a person’s attention when they are suffering, people who have PTSD also have strengths, interests, commitments, relationships with others, past experiences that were not traumatic, desires, and hopes for the future.

## Resources Are Available

Additional information, self-help tools and other resources are available online at [www.FOH4YOU.com](http://www.FOH4YOU.com). Or call us for more information, help and support. Counselors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to provide confidential assistance at no cost to you.



## Employee Assistance Program

*We Care, Just Call*

**1-800-222-0364**

1-888-262-7848 TTY Users

[www.FOH4YOU.com](http://www.FOH4YOU.com)

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