

# When You Experience A Traumatic Event

## Was It 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. Emergency workers and mental health professional also call these “critical incidents.” They may result in traumatic stress.

## Traumatic Stress Symptoms

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. were traumatic events that produced high stress for millions of people. Many people suffered psychological effects from the attacks for months, even they were not nearby. However, not everyone experiences traumatic events the same way and so stress symptoms will vary widely from person to person.

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

## Managing Acute 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 emerge 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 a stress induced illness.

## PTSD: The Stress Illness

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

## Preventing PTSD

It is easier to avoid PTSD when victims talk about their experience. One-on-one counseling can be helpful, and group work is especially effective. 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 group debriefing after a traumatic event can help prevent PTSD that can result from your brain's response to trauma. Talking about your experience will also help return you to a normal state more quickly.

## Do's & Don'ts

### After a Traumatic Event, Do:

- Exercise to alleviate physical reactions.
- Talk about the event with others who can help.
- Ask for help, if you need it.
- Try to keep on a normal schedule.
- Get plenty of rest. Drink plenty of fluids.
- Eat regular, well-balanced meals.



### After a Traumatic Event, Don't:

- Label your reactions as “crazy.”
- Make sudden, big life changes.
- Isolate or withdraw from others.
- Drink alcohol to alleviate difficult feelings. (This disturbs restful sleep crucial to psychological recovery.)
- Tell yourself to “snap out of it.”
- Force yourself to not think about the event. Let memories occur naturally. They will pass.

## PTSD : The Symptoms

The following are some of the key symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

If you exhibit any of these symptoms, it is important to seek treatment rather than tolerating symptoms that can interfere with your life. Untreated, some of these symptoms may linger for many years.

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