

*Patient Handout:*

# Traumatic Stress

Amy House, Ph.D., Medical College of Georgia

## What is a trauma?

A trauma, or traumatic event, is any event in which someone feels his/her life or physical well-being is seriously threatened, or witnesses such an event happening to someone else, and consequently feels intensely frightened, horrified, helpless, or otherwise overwhelmed. Examples of traumatic events include motor vehicle accidents, natural disasters, military combat, physical assault, child abuse, and rape. Many people may also experience life-threatening medical events, like a heart attack, as traumatic.

## What is traumatic stress?

Traumatic stress is the reaction to a traumatic event. The majority of people who experience a trauma will have some traumatic stress symptoms immediately following the traumatic event. These symptoms are usually considered normal responses to abnormal events, and they typically last for a few days to a few weeks. These symptoms can include:

- Physical symptoms: shakiness/trembling, shortness of breath, increased heart rate, increased blood pressure, nausea, dizziness, headaches, and chest pain
- Cognitive symptoms: confusion, disorientation, memory problems, difficulty with concentration, difficulty making decisions, nightmares, and repeated uncontrollable thoughts about the traumatic event
- Emotional symptoms: fear, anxiety, sadness, grief, anger, guilt, denial, depression, agitation, feeling overwhelmed, feeling “on edge”
- Behavioral symptoms: withdrawal from others, irritability, outbursts, change in activity level (either being restless or lethargic), change in appetite, disturbances in sleep, being “jumpy” or easily startled

## What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

If symptoms of traumatic stress continue for one month or more, and a person finds that his/her life is significantly disrupted by the symptoms, then the person may be experiencing **posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**. PTSD develops in approximately 30% of people who experience a traumatic event, but that rate depends a lot on the nature of the trauma, as well as characteristics of the individual. For example, about 4% of people who experience a natural disaster will develop PTSD, while about 55% of people who experience rape will develop PTSD. PTSD also sometimes develops months or even years after the traumatic event. PTSD includes three categories of symptoms which can generally be described as follows:

- 1) Repeatedly re-experiencing the trauma in your mind, because of nightmares, flashbacks, or uncontrollable thoughts
- 2) Trying to avoid reminders of the trauma and/or feeling emotionally numb
- 3) Feeling keyed up, on edge, irritable, jumpy, and/or having difficulty sleeping

## When will I recover?

If you are experiencing traumatic stress symptoms in the immediate aftermath of a trauma, the odds are very good that you will recover on your own within a few weeks. It is often helpful for trauma survivors to talk to supportive friends and family about what they have experienced. It can also be helpful to talk to a clergy member of your faith. Most people find that recovery is helped by getting back to their normal routines as much as possible after a traumatic event.

## Do I need professional help?

There are two situations where it is advisable to seek help in recovery:

- 1) If your initial reaction to the trauma was very severe, such that you experienced disorientation, feelings of unreality, and/or loss of memory for all or part of the event, then you should seek help for recovery right away. People who experience these severe symptoms are at higher risk for developing PTSD, and early treatment can prevent this.
- 2) If it has been a month or more since the traumatic event and you are not recovering, *or* if you notice that your symptoms are worsening, *or* if you are developing PTSD symptoms for the first time months or years after the event, then you should seek help in recovering from PTSD. Once PTSD has developed, most people do not recover without intervention.

## What treatments are available?

The good news is that there are effective treatments available for PTSD. The most effective treatment is a psychological approach to treatment called cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT is a form of therapy that focuses on helping you feel better by changing your thoughts and behaviors in the here-and-now. The form of CBT that usually works best for PTSD includes “exposure therapy.” Exposure therapy involves repeatedly imagining the trauma in detail, in a safe environment, in order to help the survivor gain control over the images, thoughts, and feelings that were overwhelming at the time of the trauma. CBT also usually involves examining thoughts and beliefs related to the trauma, learning skills for coping with anxiety, anger, and guilt, and learning how to handle stress effectively.

There are also medications available that can reduce the symptoms of PTSD. The medications that are most effective in reducing PTSD symptoms are certain antidepressants. Medication is often most useful in combination with psychotherapy.

## Where can I get more information?

- National Center for PTSD website: [www.ncptsd.org](http://www.ncptsd.org)
- General Information Book:
  - Trauma and Recovery by Judith Herman
- Self-Help Books:
  - I Can't Get Over It: A Handbook for Trauma Survivors by Matsakis
  - Life After Trauma: A Workbook for Healing by Rosenbloom & Williams
  - The PTSD Workbook: Simple, Effective Techniques for Overcoming Traumatic Stress Symptoms by Williams & Pojula