

# The impact of traumatic events on mental health



Mental Health  
Foundation



## Around 1 in 3 adults in England report having experienced at least one traumatic event.

Traumatic events can be defined as experiences that put either a person or someone close to them at risk of serious harm or death. These can include:

- Road accidents
- Violence/prolonged abuse
- Natural disasters
- Serious illnesses

### What happens when you experience a traumatic event?

When you experience a traumatic event, your body's defences take effect and create a stress response, which may make you feel a variety of physical symptoms, behave differently and experience more intense emotions.

This **fight or flight response**, where your body produces chemicals which prepare your body for an emergency can lead to symptoms such as:

- raised blood pressure
- increased heart rate
- increased sweating
- reduced stomach activity (loss of appetite)

This is normal, as it's your body's evolutionary way of responding to an emergency, making it easier for you to fight or run away.

Directly after the event people may also experience shock and denial. This can give way over several hours or days to a range of other feelings such as sadness, anger and guilt. Many people feel better and recover gradually.

However, if these feelings persist, they can lead to more serious mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression.



## Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

People experiencing PTSD can feel anxious for years after the trauma, whether or not they were physically injured.

Common symptoms of PTSD include re-experiencing the event in nightmares or flashbacks, avoiding things or places associated with the event, panic attacks, sleep disturbance and poor concentration. Depression, emotional numbing, drug or alcohol misuse and anger are also common.

The most effective therapeutic approach for long-term, severe PTSD appears to be talking treatments with a clinical psychologist, in which the person with PTSD is encouraged to talk through their experiences in detail. This may involve behavioural or cognitive therapeutic approaches. Antidepressants may also be prescribed to relieve the depression which people who have survived trauma often experience at the same time.

[Find out more about PTSD here](#)

## Depression

Depression is different from feeling down or sad. Someone experiencing depression will experience intense emotions of anxiety, hopelessness, negativity and helplessness, and the feelings stay with them instead of going away.

Talking therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and some forms of counselling and psychotherapy work well for depression. Anti-depressants may also be recommended, either on their own or in combination with talking therapies.

[Find out more about depression here](#)

Not everyone who experiences a traumatic event will experience a mental health problem. Some people may experience other mental health problems not covered in this factsheet. You can find out more information on mental health in our [mental health A-Z](#).



## What to do after experiencing a traumatic event

### Turn to others for support

It can be difficult to talk to close family or friends after a traumatic event. You may not want to cause them any distress or may simply want some space to process it all. However, it is important to be around other people when you feel able to, as they can help with your recovery and wellbeing. You do not have to talk to them about the experience. If you don't have anyone close by to talk to, you can contact one of the organisations listed who will be able to offer further help.

### Look after yourself

It is important to look after your health and wellbeing. This can include taking a break or some time away to deal with your experience. You should also try and keep a healthy diet and stay away from drugs and alcohol, which can exacerbate the problem.

### Seek professional help

If you are experiencing symptoms that are affecting your day to day life, it is important to get professional help as soon as possible so you can begin to get better. You should consider seeking help if:

- You don't have anyone to talk to
- You don't feel like your feelings have returned to normal after 6 weeks
- Someone close to you has noticed changes and is urging you to seek help
- Your work or studies are affected
- You find it difficult to carry out daily tasks
- You are using drugs or alcohol to cope

The first person to approach is your **family doctor or GP**. He or she should be able to give advice about treatment, and may refer you to another local professional. There are also a number of voluntary organisations on the next page which can offer advice or a listening ear.



### **Samaritans**

The Samaritans offer emotional support 24 hours a day - in full confidence. Call 08457 909090 or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)

### **Mind Infoline**

Mind provides information on a range of mental health topics to support people in their own area from 9.00am to 6.00pm, Monday to Friday. Call 0300 123 3393 or e-mail [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk).

### **Rethink Advice and Information Service**

Rethink provide specific solution-based guidance - 0300 5000927 Fax: 020 7820 1149 E-mail: [advice@rethink.org](mailto:advice@rethink.org)

### **Specialist mental health services**

There are a number of specialist services that provide various treatments, including counselling and other talking treatments. Often these different services are coordinated by a community mental health team (CMHT), which is usually based either at a hospital or a local community mental health centre. Some teams provide 24-hour services so that you can contact them in a crisis. You should be able to contact your local CMHT through your local social services or social work team.

### **List of UK trauma services**

From the UK Psychological Trauma Society: <http://www.ukpts.co.uk/site/assets/UK-Trauma-Services-Jun-2014.pdf>

### **Other useful resources**

Royal College of Psychiatrists factsheet on coping after a traumatic event: <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/healthadvice/problemsdisorders/copingafteratraumaticevent.aspx>



**mentalhealth.org.uk**

*Our mission is to help people understand, protect and sustain their mental health.*

*Prevention is at the heart of what we do, because the best way to deal with a crisis is to prevent it from happening in the first place.*

*We inform and influence the development of evidence-based mental health policy at national and local government level. In tandem, we help people to access information about the steps they can take to reduce their mental health risks and increase their resilience. We want to empower people to take action when problems are at an early stage. This work is informed by our long history of working directly with people living with or at risk of developing mental health problems.*

*The Mental Health Foundation is a UK charity that relies on public donations and grant funding to deliver and campaign for good mental health for all.*

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