

First Aid for Emotional Trauma

Information Sheet

Trauma (or post-traumatic stress) is the emotional “shock” after a life-threatening, violent event. Anything that makes our body panic and go into a fight/flight/freeze response can leave us traumatized. The effects may be immediate or take time to surface, and can be felt for the rest of our lives.

Being traumatized is a **normal response to an extreme situation**; even ‘tough’ people like firefighters or soldiers can be traumatized.

The causes of trauma include disaster, abuse, rape, witnessing violence, loss, or spending time with people who are traumatized (“vicarious traumatization”). Because **trauma happens when our bodies perceive our lives are in danger and we can’t escape**, even medical surgeries, emotional abuse, or loss of a loved one or home can be traumatic.

Trauma means getting **stuck in the memory** of a life-threatening event. Our bodies and minds act like the event is still happening, right now, even though it is in the past.

We are on guard, defensive, and ‘geared up,’ or hopeless, paralyzed, and numb. We avoid things that remind us of the past and trigger painful memories, and we isolate ourselves from others and limit our freedom. We block out unpleasant memories and feelings, sometimes turning to drugs and alcohol. We repeat past situations. We have panic attacks or go into jumpy “fight-flight” mode, even when there is no real danger in the present. Our lives, health, and relationships with other people suffer, and **we live constrained and limited by our past**. Sometimes we take our pain out on others, or become self-destructive.

In the past these trauma responses were crucial to our survival, and in the present they protect us from being overwhelmed. When we value the usefulness of our trauma coping mechanisms, forgiveness and acceptance can invite gradual change.

Unfortunately **trauma is usually not a wound that heals just by waiting** for time to pass. Trauma can keep hold of our lives for many years. It is important to try to work with the trauma somehow -- in whatever way is best for you.

Making connections with others and honestly expressing our feelings is important, especially when we want to hide or avoid our problems. **Finding safety and trust is the first step to healing.**



Just talking, though, may not be enough to heal trauma. **Sometimes talking about what happened can mean reliving what happened** -- and not help. If the talking seems to go in circles or not lead to a sense of completion, it might be just stirring things up, not healing them.

It is also commonly believed that you can heal trauma by ‘getting it out of your system,’ punching pillows or venting strong emotions. This can be helpful, but sometimes it can end up making things worse, or even re-traumatize you. **Real trauma healing is usually slower and more gentle.**

Therapy, including EMDR, DBT, and cognitive-behavioral, can help many people. Others find these are not helpful. This sheet focuses on what we can do for each other as a community. Most importantly, **everyone is individual -- experiment and discover what works for you** and learn how to best help yourself and others.

Signs of a traumatized or ‘triggered’ state:

Repetitive thinking of worrying thoughts or memories related to the event; intrusive memories and feelings. Chronic fear.

Staring off into space, ‘thousand yard stare.’

Flattened or frozen expression and body: freezing and numbing. “Emptiness.”

Extreme defensiveness and rigid thinking, irritability, explosive overreaction.

Sexual preoccupation and constant interest

Discomfort, pain, stress, illness: “nervios.”

Returning to traumatizing situations.

When someone has just been traumatized:

1. *Help any bodily injury, medical issue, or physical need first.*

2. *Make sure to go to a safe place.*

3. *Don’t get up and act like nothing happened. Stay dry, warm, and still. Trembling or being emotional is part of healing, and better than ‘numbing out.’*

4. *If the person wants to talk, listen without interrupting or changing the subject.*

5. *Encourage them to feel the sensations in their body fully. (See below.)*

Feeling Body Sensations: Key to Trauma First Aid

Trauma cuts us off from our bodies. When we are in overwhelming danger, we dissociate or 'leave our bodies' as a protective measure. Later this protective mechanism becomes stuck and counterproductive. The **key to healing trauma is to return to our bodies**, by feeling our physical sensations and making our bodies safe and alive again.

Ask, "How do you know that you are sad? Is there tightness in your chest or throat? How do you know you are afraid? Is there a cold feeling, or a sinking feeling in your stomach? Feel it fully. How large is the feeling? Is it changing? What do you feel next?" Listen without interruption and give plenty of time to feel and respond. Grounding and resourcing yourself will also help the other person.

Keeping eyes open usually is best for focusing on body sensations.

If the person can't feel their body at all, ask, "Can you feel your feet on the ground? Your pelvis sitting on the chair?" Grasp their hand or shoulder and say "Can you feel my hand?" **Always ask before touching.** If lying down, ask them to sit up. Ask to walk around slowly and feel their legs and feet. Or gently hold & press their feet to the ground.

If the person is staring off in the distance, talking in circles, withdrawn, or agitated, encourage them to put their attention to the world. Ask "Look around. What colors do you see? Can you name them?" Ask them what sensations they feel in their bodies.

When someone is preoccupied with the traumatic memories, find distractions. Ask them "When was a time that you felt safe and peaceful? Can you describe the sights, sounds, smells and colors of that time?" Ask them to feel sensations in their body.

If the person is defensive, on-guard and uncooperative, just drop it. Change the subject, go for a walk, leave the discussion / work for later. When a traumatized and defensive person perceives you as a threat, it is very difficult to convince them to just 'snap out of it' or to see that they are experiencing a flashback. Wait until they are calm to discuss it.

If body sensations are too uncomfortable, try to find a sensation, even small, that is neutral or pleasant, and focus on it. Go back and forth between uncomfortable and pleasant sensations. Notice any relaxation in breathing, warmth or trembling. This is normal; feel the sensations fully.

Accepting our feelings

Feelings of fear, guilt, loss, sadness or anger are normal when we are traumatized. Don't judge feelings in yourself or others. Listen with acceptance and care.

Triggers:

It can be helpful to make a list of situations and things that trigger traumatic memories and upset you. Anniversaries of events, people, places, and situations can all be triggers. Learn to avoid your

triggers, expose yourself gradually, or prepare for them when they come. Ask friends to help you.

Resourcing:

Write down a list of things that make your body feel strong and safe. It can be anything, such as walking or taking baths, exercising or sports, listening to music or petting your dog. Add things you've done in the past and would like to do again. Keep the list and add to it with new resources you find.

Breathing:

Relaxed, deep breathing can often bring relief from trauma symptoms. Sit comfortably and gently fill your belly, chest, and shoulders on the in breath, and exhale your shoulders, chest, and belly. Breathe comfortably -- don't push or use effort -- but allow yourself to take slow, deep breaths. A few minutes of breathing this way can help calm you down.

Physical Health

Trauma survivors have weakened immune systems and are more vulnerable to getting sick. Get adequate rest and fresh water, go to nature, exercise, and avoid junk food. Consider a good-quality multi-vitamin/multi-mineral supplement, with plenty of C and B.

Psychiatric Medications:

Anti-depressants, tranquilizers (benzodiazepines), and other psychiatric drugs may provide short term relief and can help with extreme anxiety and sleeplessness. These drugs have very risky side effects and are toxic to the body. Long-term use can lead to addiction, make sleeplessness and anxiety worse, interfere with the natural healing process, and overdose can be fatal. Avoid or use cautiously.

Alternative, Holistic, and Herbal Medicine

Herbs, traditional remedies, and holistic care can be very effective for trauma. After 9-11 and Katrina, acupuncturists gave immediate relief to trauma survivors, including firefighters and medical personnel.

Helping Children Who Have Been Traumatized

1. Attend to any physical medical needs first. Make sure the child is safe, warm, and dry.
2. Calm yourself -- this will help calm the child.
3. Tell the child it is OK to cry, to tremble or shake. Gently hold them and say "It's OK. It's all right to cry / feel angry. Just let the shaking happen."
4. Listen to the child and tell them their emotions are OK. Don't try to talk them out of their feelings or make them hush up.
5. Later, ask the child about what happened. Use toys or puppets. Go slowly so they are not overwhelmed. Ask what they are feeling in their body, where they feel it, what it's like. Stop and reassure them, then come back later when they are calm.

