

Treatment for Trauma

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What are some possible reactions to a traumatic event?

- *Psychological Distress*—Some people may feel sadness, fear, anxiety, anger, horror and grief.
- *Emotional Difficulties*—Just as every individual is different, so are their emotional reactions to trauma. Some common and normal emotional reactions to a traumatic event may include:
 - o Depression
 - o Fear or Grief
 - o Anger/Irritability
 - o Strong reactions to reminders of the event (e.g., sirens)
 - o Worry that an unpredictable tragedy might happen to you or a loved one
 - o Decreased interest in activities you usually enjoy
 - o Emotional numbness or feelings of detachment
 - o Feeling helpless
 - o Isolation/Withdrawal
- *Confusion or Cognitive Difficulties*—Many people find they have difficulty thinking or focusing following a traumatic event. Some common cognitive reactions may include:
 - o Intrusive thoughts/pictures you can't get out of your mind
 - o Loss of concentration
 - o Difficulty making decisions
 - o Forgetfulness
 - o Misplacing or losing belongings
 - o Difficulty remembering some part of the event
 - o Deliberate efforts to avoid thoughts and/or feelings about the event
 - o Inability to focus on anything other than the crisis
- *Re-experiencing the Event*—Some people may have flashbacks or intrusive thoughts about the event. Often, people find these thoughts to be disturbing and/or frightening.
- *Nightmares*—Some people may have bad dreams about the event or other nightmares that represent the trauma. They may have difficulty staying asleep, and eventually avoid going to sleep, or they may want to sleep with the light on.
- *Physical Reactions*—People often experience a variety of physical reactions following a traumatic event. Physical symptoms may include:
 - o Fatigue, exhaustion—even when you've slept
 - o Disrupted sleep
 - o Loss of motivation
 - o Anxiety
 - o Restlessness or inability to relax
 - o Nightmares or daydreams about the event
 - o Exaggerated startle reactions
 - o Headaches or stomach aches
 - o Digestive problems
- *Spiritual Crisis*—Some people question their faith and wonder how God could have allowed this terrible thing to happen. They may become angry with God and disillusioned with religion in general. They may have difficulty finding answers to the question of why this happened.
- *Avoidance*—Some people avoid people, places or things that remind them of the trauma. When they do encounter reminders of the trauma, they may experience feelings similar to those they experienced during the trauma itself.

What is PTSD?

Some people have an intense and prolonged reaction to traumatic events called post-traumatic stress. Post-traumatic stress can significantly interfere with your functioning, and may not become apparent until months after a traumatic event. Symptoms include:

- Flashbacks of the events
- Nightmares
- Persistent memory disturbances
- Persistent intrusive recollections of the events
- Self-medication (e.g., use of alcohol or drugs to avoid feelings)
- Acute and persistent anger or irritability
- Persistent feelings of depression
- Persistent emotional numbness and/or flooding, or alteration between the two
- Hyperarousal (e.g., anxiety, edginess, hypervigilance)
- Panic attacks
- Development of phobias

About 25% of people exposed to traumatic events will develop PTSD. Estimates of the prevalence of PTSD in the U.S. population range from 8% to 12%.

What can you do to cope with trauma?

- Accept your feelings as being a normal reaction to an extreme situation. You are not “going crazy,” rather you are having intense feelings that are perfectly understandable and to be expected.
- Be gentle with yourself. Don't expect to function as if nothing happened or beat yourself up for not getting things done right now. Cut yourself some slack—you're not lazy, you're trying to recover.
- Don't withdraw—reach out and stay connected to peers, family and friends. Bottling up your feelings will not make them go away. In fact, it may prolong them.
- Whenever possible, structure your time and attempt to continue at least some of your customary daily activities.
- Use exercise, physical activity and relaxation techniques to help you get through this time. Just getting outside and going for a walk can help.
- Seek professional help, if necessary. If talking to friends, family and others is not making you feel better, make an appointment at CAPS, (321) 674-8050, to determine if counseling is appropriate. Counseling can help you put your feelings into words.
- Remember you aren't alone. Use the resources available to help you.

Treatments for PTSD

Several treatment options are available for people experiencing distress following a traumatic event. Whether it is individual, group, medication treatment or a combination of these, treatment has been proven to be effective much of the time and can help a person to get back to their regular routines and healthy functioning.

Common Components of Trauma Treatment

- Education on the development and impact of psychological symptoms. Understanding that PTSD is a medically recognized anxiety diagnosis that occurs in normal individuals under extremely stressful conditions is essential for effective treatment.
- Exposure to the traumatic event in a safe, controlled environment (such as through imagery), and examination of reactions and beliefs in relation to that event.
- Examination and resolution of strong feelings such as anger, shame or guilt, which are common among survivors of trauma.
- Teaching coping skills for post-traumatic memories, reminders, reactions and feelings. Trauma memories usually don't go away entirely as a result of therapy, but become more manageable.

Individual Psychotherapy

This involves meeting with a qualified therapist or counselor. Typically these meetings are once a week for an hour and focus on talking about the events, your reactions to them and how to create positive change in your life. Individual therapy can differ greatly based on the modality used.

Behavioral or Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

This treatment approach looks at the ways in which a person thinks about a problem, their learned responses to triggers associated with the problem and ways in which their thinking impacts their emotional state. This treatment often uses a combination of exposure (thinking about the event or the trigger) and relaxation training along with cognitive restructuring (changing the way you think about or the beliefs you have about) the event. This process tends to “desensitize” a person’s response to reminders of the trauma to lessen the emotional impact. CBT has been well-researched and shown to be effective in the treatment of anxiety symptoms associated with trauma.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

This is a relatively new form of treatment that has been found rapid and effective in treating psychological distress associated with trauma in numerous studies over the past 15 years. This treatment modality uses exposure to the traumatic memory paired with “bilateral stimulation of the brain” by tracking the therapist’s fingers or a string of lights with the eyes or listening to alternating tones. Current thoughts, feelings and physical sensations and beliefs are activated and the tracking helps to process and reduce the emotional and psychological reaction to the memory. This desensitization helps the person to reprocess their negative beliefs about themselves (e.g., “It was my fault”) to more adaptive and accurate beliefs (“I did the best that I could”).

Hypnosis

Hypnosis is often used in the psychological treatment of trauma. It is not a modality in and of itself, but rather is an effective tool for the therapist to use to help foster change for the individual. Hypnosis involves the induction of a trance state. A trance state is similar to a daydream-like state in which the survivor of the trauma is able to access their psychological resources to help them cope and reduce distress. Hypnosis is often used in exposure therapies to allow the individual a safe place where they are in control to be exposed to the traumatic event and become desensitized to it. It can also be used to help the survivor to explore the trauma in a safe way to identify distressing emotions, beliefs or aspects of the trauma that can be addressed in individual or group therapy.

Group Therapy

Group therapy can be very helpful following a traumatic event as it provides a safe and supportive environment in which to discuss a shared experience with others. There is often a felt sense that “nobody understands,” and a group can help you to feel less alienated, normalizing your reactions to an abnormal event.

Medication

Traumatic events can influence the neurochemistry of the body and brain impacting a person in many ways. Excessive stress hormones can make it difficult to concentrate, relax or sleep, and can increase blood pressure, muscle tension, skin conductance and general arousal levels. It can impair immune system functioning, making people more vulnerable to illness. Often, these changes can lead to depression or anxiety. Medication can be effective in resetting levels in the brain and may prove to be very helpful for a period of time. Some types of medication include:

- **Anxiolytic (Anti-anxiety) Medications (e.g., Xanax or Ativan)** These medications tend to be short-lasting to help reduce physiological and emotional arousal.
- **Antidepressants (e.g., Prozac, Paxil or Zoloft)** Research has shown these medications to be effective in helping to reduce overall PTSD symptoms including irritability, depressed or anxious moods, anger, impulsivity and obsessive thoughts.
- **Adrenergic Agents (e.g., Propranolol and Clonidine)** These medications act on the adrenal system and help to lower overall arousal levels and control intrusive images, memories and nightmares.

There are many variables to consider in the decision to take or forego medication and only a medical doctor write a prescription. A consultation with a psychiatrist can provide you with the information necessary to make an informed decision. The choice to take medication is always up to you.

Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

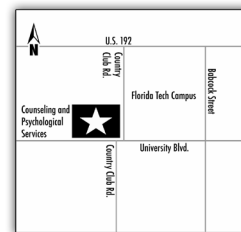
CAPS is a counseling facility operated by Florida Institute of Technology’s School of Psychology. Its goals are to promote the best possible academic, vocational and emotional health. Our services are available to students and their immediate families. Call CAPS at (321) 674-8050.

Center Hours

Monday–Thursday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Friday, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Location

Intersection of Country Club Road and University Boulevard, west of Babcock Street



For additional counseling resources,
visit www.fit.edu/caps or call 674-8050.

PY-438-707

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Florida Institute of Technology
Counseling and Psychological Services