

# Understanding trauma



## What is trauma?

Trauma describes an event in which a person's sense of emotional or physical safety is significantly harmed or threatened and where they feel overwhelmed.

There are many different types of events which can be traumatic. Although traumatic experiences often involve a threat to life or safety, such as war, natural disasters or physical or sexual assault, any situation that leaves us feeling overwhelmed and alone can be traumatic.

So events like bullying, physical health problems or losing someone we love may be traumatic if that is our personal experience. Likewise, childhood trauma can come from anything that impacts a child's sense of safety and security. This could include long separations from a caregiver, an unpredictable home environment, parents fighting or violence in the home, critical parenting, neglect or abuse.

## The impact of trauma

Trauma affects different people in different ways and there is no right or wrong way to feel after a trauma. Not everyone who goes through a traumatic event will experience difficulties afterwards.

When we experience a trauma, the 'threat centre' of our brain goes on to high alert. The threat centre's job is to look out for danger and prepare our body to respond with either 'fight', 'flight' or 'freeze'. For some people, the activation of our threat centre can cause a range of impacts for a while after the event. Physical impacts include feeling on edge, difficulty concentrating and bodily tension and emotional impacts such as feeling anxious, scared, angry, or numb. As our brain tries to process the experience this can cause repeated thoughts of the trauma, flashbacks (in which you see images and feel things as if you were back in that moment), or nightmares.

For most people, these immediate reactions slowly reduce over a few days or weeks after the trauma as our mind and body learns that we are no longer in danger and our threat centre calms down. There may be times that these difficulties temporarily re-emerge (such as at anniversaries or other reminders or when facing another stressful event). All of these experiences are normal and part of the process of your mind and body recovering from the impact of the trauma.

For some people, however, the impact of the trauma may be more long-lasting. When someone has ongoing difficulties with recurrent thoughts about the trauma, feeling on edge and trying to avoid the memory, this may be a sign of post-traumatic-stress-disorder (PTSD). For other people, trauma impacts their mental health in other ways and may manifest in low self-esteem, difficulties in relationships, or they may develop anxiety, depression or other mental health difficulties. This might be immediately following the trauma, or many years later.



## Looking after your mental health

There are a range of things you can do to help yourself if you are experiencing difficulties with your mental health that are related to trauma you have been through:

### Managing nightmares and flashbacks

Learning grounding skills can help you bring your mind back into the here and now after experiencing a nightmare or flashback. It works by focusing your attention on any of your five senses.

Some examples you can try:

- Looking around and list (out loud or in your head) all the things you can see
- Noticing 3 things you can feel (e.g. the floor beneath your feet, the chair you are sitting on, the clothes against your skin)
- Carry something with you that smells strong and pleasant (like perfume or essential oils) and breathe this in focusing on the smell
- Count how many different noises you can hear



### **Talk to someone you trust**

Although it can be difficult, talking about what you have been through and how you are feeling can be a powerful way to help yourself. When we put our thoughts and feelings into words we are actually assisting our mind in making sense of our experience, which in turn can help us to process what we have been through. This could be a friend, family member, peer support group or a helpline. If talking to someone feels too much, try writing it down instead.

### **Look after yourself**

Look after your physical health: Try to be more active (eg., regular exercise can help to lift your mood), get good sleep, eat well, and avoid alcohol and drugs.

Do things that are important to you: Plan daily activities that are meaningful to you: these could be things you need to do, things that give you a sense of connection with other people or things that give you pleasure.

Practice relaxation : Taking some time out each day to relax by practicing deep breathing, doing some simple stretches, listening to music, or following a relaxation exercise or guided meditation online.

### **Get professional support**

Mental health problems are treatable, and there are a number of different treatment options you can consider. Talking therapies (such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) as well as medications (such as antidepressants) have proven effective for mental health problems caused by trauma. Therapists, counsellors or psychologists focus on talk therapy as treatment while psychiatrists are medical doctors who can prescribe medications. It is completely up to you what treatment you feel will work best for you.

*Free Mental Health Counselling Service iCall +91 9152987821  
Monday to Saturday 8AM - 10PM*