

What is Trauma?

Trauma is a powerful emotional response to a stressful, frightening, or distressing experience, such as loss of a loved one, a physical injury, war, violence, or abuse. Trauma may cause continued emotional and physical symptoms and reactions long after the traumatic event.

Signs and Symptoms of Trauma

Victims of traumatic experiences often have strong physical or emotional reactions immediately that may fade over the course of a few days or weeks. For some people, the symptoms of trauma may become severe and last longer. This may be the result of the nature of the traumatic event, availability of emotional support, past and present life stressors, personality types, available coping mechanisms, and the age of the child or young adult. Each age group can experience unique signs and symptoms of traumatic stress. Some of the most common symptoms of trauma may include:

Cognitive

Re-experiencing the trauma/ flashbacks.

Nightmares.

Loss of memory and concentration.

Disorientation.

Confusion.

Mood swings.

Behavioral

Avoidance of activities or places that trigger memories of the event.

Social isolation and withdrawal.

Lack of interest in previously enjoyable activities.

Physical

Easily startled.

Tremendous fatigue and exhaustion.

Tachycardia.

Edginess.

Insomnia.

Chronic muscle patterns.

Sexual dysfunction.

Changes in sleeping and eating patterns.

Vague complaints of aches and pains throughout the body.

Extreme alertness; always on the lookout for warnings of potential danger, "on edge."

Types of Trauma

Acute: Trauma resulting from a single incident.

Chronic: Repeated and prolonged trauma such as domestic violence or abuse.

Complex: Exposure to varied and multiple traumatic events that are extreme in nature.

Psychological

Overwhelming fear.

Obsessive and compulsive behaviors.

Detachment from other people and emotions.

Emotional numbing.

Depression.

Guilt – especially if one lived while others perished.

Shame.

Emotional shock.

Disbelief.

Irritability.

Anger.

Anxiety.

Panic attacks.

Trauma Treatments

- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a common and well-supported treatment for trauma disorders. CBT uses strategies to question and challenge unhealthy thought patterns that contribute to the symptoms of trauma. The benefits of CBT can be long lasting.
- Exposure-based therapies focus on confronting the triggers of trauma in order to disconnect them with feelings of distress. This treatment involves repeated exposure to the triggers in a gradual and safe manner until the trauma symptoms diminish.
- Medication may be used to treat and manage symptoms of trauma, and can help patients whose symptoms have made them unable to participate in psychotherapy.
- Other helpful treatments for trauma survivors include eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), group therapy, and narrative exposure therapy. Ask your therapist what treatments are available.

