Coping During COVID:
TRAUMA

What is trauma?

Trauma happens when you, or someone you're close to, experiences something frightening or threatening that causes you more emotional stress than you're able to cope with — even long after it's happened. Sometimes traumatic events hit unexpectedly like a lightning bolt, splitting the world into Before and After, but that isn't always the case. Many people also experience ongoing, overlapping traumatic events that cause enduring distress that worsens when a new trauma — like the coronavirus pandemic — further disrupts their ability to cope effectively.

The effects of trauma can sneak up on you, or masquerade as "just having a hard time" (read: you're anxious, upset, angry, jumpy, stressed, and struggling), and it can be easy to dismiss these symptoms as "nothing" — particularly if you're dealing with longstanding distressing situations that continue in your everyday life.

It can be especially hard to identify trauma for what it is during this time when everyone's stress levels are high and our usual forms of coping and support (hanging out with friends, outdoor activities, attending concerts, working out, etc.) have been upended.

Knowing what to look for can help you see if you are being affected by trauma, so you can get the help you need.

Trauma is the psychological and emotional response that occurs after a person is exposed to a distressing or life-threatening event.

This includes personally experiencing an event, seeing it happen to someone else, or learning that it happened to close a family member or friend. Common traumatic experiences include the unexpected death or hospitalization of a loved one, your own serious illness or injury, abrupt or hostile separation from a loved one — for example, the deportation or incarceration of a family member — a natural disaster (including the coronavirus pandemic), or physical or sexual violence. Trauma also includes long-term stresses like experiencing racism or discrimination, homelessness, witnessing ongoing violence at home or in your community, being in an emotionally or physically abusive relationship, or military deployments to active war zones.

Signs of Trauma

- ✔ Frequently replaying the event in your mind
- ✔ Having nightmares, or upsetting memories that pop into your mind out of nowhere
- ✔ A pervasive feeling that the world is unsafe or seemingly endless worries about the future
- ✔ Avoiding situations that cause strong emotions or avoiding people, places, and things that remind you of the trauma
- ✔ Difficulty trusting others (or yourself) in the wake of the event
- ✔ Feeling unusually irritable, angry, moody, or sad
- ✔ Blaming yourself for bad things that have happened
- ✔ Feeling a sense of incompetence, or like you're unable to complete (or start) tasks
- ✔ Difficulty concentrating; spacing out throughout the day or during conversations with others
- ✔ Changes in appetite, self-care, or social habits
- ✔ Feeling jumpy or easily startled; feeling on guard or defensive when interacting with others
- ✔ Using alcohol or drugs to numb or change the way you feel (also known as self-medicating)

Tips for Coping After a Traumatic Event

Some traumas are personal. Others, like the pandemic and systemic racism, affect entire communities. When traumatic events play out on a large scale, as they are right now, it can be hard to know how to cope and how to help. If you or a friend have experienced, or continue to experience, trauma there are things that you can do to help — in the short-term and in the long-term.

Be aware of what you're taking in.

Avoid oversaturating yourself with bad news (no doom scrolling, please), and be conscious of what you're reading, watching, or posting on social media. Stick with accounts, channels and shows that bring you joy, not ones that bring you down.

Talk about it.

It can be hard to talk about a traumatic experience, but speaking up is the first step to recovery. Reaching out to a parent, a guardian, a teacher, or another adult you trust can help you feel supported and make sense of what happened, as well as help you stay healthy and safe.

Maintain routines.

Try to stick to a routine as much as possible. When everything feels chaotic and disordered, routines can be a way of reassuring yourself that life will be okay again. The pandemic has upended many old routines, so if you're struggling, now is a great time to be intentional about establishing a new one. It can be something as simple as making an exercise plan or going to bed at the same time every night.

Memorialize.

The virus has disrupted many of the common rituals and practices for mourning the loss of loved ones, which can make the death of someone close to us feel even more traumatic. If you have lost a loved one, finding a way to honor their life, even if it's not in a traditional way, can help bring closure and give you a way to accept the loss. This could look like planting a tree, sharing stories, making a memory book, burning a candle — whatever feels right to you.

Practice self-care.

Practicing self-care can help you cope with stress and provide a sense of normalcy and balance. Do things you find relaxing or calming. Participate in activities or hobbies that give you the chance to take some time for yourself and just focus on the moment. Remember, self-care doesn't need to be complicated. Spend time with family and friends, bake, start a simple craft project, go for a run or walk, or watch a movie — anything healthy that makes you feel calmer.

Support friends.

If a friend has been through something traumatic, it's important to listen and be kind. But remember, trauma is complicated and healing takes time and a lot of support. You can't help anyone if you're feeling burned out too. The best way to care for both your friend and yourself is by encouraging them to speak with supportive adults in their life and/or a mental health professional. You'll be creating the space you need to be there for them in a healthy way and ensuring they get the help they need to recover.

Volunteer.

Volunteering can give you back a sense of purpose and control and add to your "bank account" of positive emotions. When we do good for others, it feels good, and there has never been a better time to get involved. This could look like sewing masks for a local charity (or just making some for friends and family), participating in mutual aid networks in your area to support community members in need, or getting involved in activism in person or online.

Trauma Treatment

Good treatment can make all the difference when it comes to recovering from a traumatic event. Effective treatment can reduce upsetting memories related to the trauma and help you make sense of what happened and why. It can also restore your sense of safety, reduce self-blame and guilt, and provide healthy, lasting coping skills.

The two most effective methods of trauma treatment are:

FOR ALL GROUPS

Trauma-Focused Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT)

TF-CBT teaches you a range of effective coping skills to manage your emotional and physical reactions to the trauma. Things like learning to relax and calm down when stressed and how to manage unhelpful or painful thoughts about the trauma. It also helps with processing the traumatic event so you can move forward in your life safely and with a balanced perspective.

FOR YOUNG ADULTS (AND OLDER)

Cognitive-Processing Therapy

Cognitive-processing therapy (CPT) is a specific type of cognitive-behavioral therapy that teaches you how to examine and change the upsetting thoughts and beliefs you may have since your trauma. The goal is to help change how you feel to improve recovery and move forward in your life effectively.