

Understanding and managing 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 and alone. Recent research suggests that the experience of living through the current pandemic can be categorized as events of 'mass trauma'.

Trauma can change the way we see ourselves, others and the world around us. Events such as the death of a loved one, the feeling of helplessness if one experiences a severe case of coronavirus, or even the way social and mainstream media reports on the pandemic, can affect us in a traumatic way.

Impact of trauma?

Trauma affects different people differently, and although not everyone may experience trauma the same way, these are some of the common effects:

- **Trauma activates the 'threat center' of our brain**, leading to a 'high alert' environment within us that causes us to respond with 'fight', 'flight', or 'freeze' responses. Trauma may also cause a range of physical or emotional reactions such as bodily tensions, feeling scared or numb, or even psychological reactions due to our brain processing the trauma- such as flashbacks or nightmares.
- **Most people experience a reduction in these reactions after a few days or weeks as they realize there is no longer a threat to them.** However, sometimes these reactions may temporarily return on times such as anniversaries of that traumatic event or if a similar event occurs. These experiences are a normal part of trauma recovery.



- **For others, trauma may have a more long-lasting impact.** Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder can lead to feeling on edge, avoiding the memories of trauma and having difficulties with recurrent thoughts about the event. Another possible impact is on the mental health of trauma survivors whose self-esteem or relationships could be impacted, or they may develop mood disorders.
- **Individuals whose trauma response lasts longer, move beyond the 'fight' or 'flight' stage into the freeze one.** The current pandemic and the feelings of uncertainty around it are activating the freeze response for many people. The way most of us cope-by going outdoors or engaging in social activities are also curtailed right now, hence it is normal to feel overwhelmed and experience a freeze response.

- **Another common reaction to trauma is in the form of trauma-related guilt.** It refers to the feeling of regret stemming from the belief that one could or should have done something different at the time a traumatic event occurred. One common type of trauma-related guilt, called Survivor's Guilt occurs when a person has made it through some kind of traumatic event while others have not. A person may question why they survived. They may even blame themselves for surviving a traumatic event as if they did something wrong. Those who may have survived the Covid-19 virus, especially if they knew someone who succumbed to it, are susceptible to such feelings at this time.

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:

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. Although outdoor exercise may be challenging at this time, one can exercise at home using available resources.



Prioritize

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 practising deep breathing, doing some simple stretches, listening to music, or following a relaxation exercise or guided meditation online.

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. You can refer to the 5-4-3-2-1 technique given in the stress leaflet for more information on grounding.

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 helpline. If talking to someone feels too much, try writing it down instead. In the current pandemic, although it may not be possible to meet people face to face, either meeting as and when permitted by the local regulations or via a video call may help make meaning of one's distress.

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. We have curated a list of service providers which you can access at the end of the resources page.