



# Mind/Body Health: The Effects of Traumatic Stress

What is a Traumatic Stress Reaction?

People who experience or witness horrible events such as school shootings, combat, rape, torture, natural disasters, accidents or other things in which their physical safety and life -- or the safety and life of others -- was in danger have experienced a traumatic stress. People who are repeatedly exposed to life or death situations, such as EMT and rescue squad workers, police officers, fire fighters and medical personnel on burn wards or trauma units where stress levels and mortality rates are high also witness trauma. Anyone who has experienced these things has experienced a shock and, even if all ultimately escape danger, the people who lived through the event may feel like life "just isn't the same anymore." People may experience a variety of reactions, many of which are understandable in the context of experiencing or witnessing traumatic events such as the hurricanes. Experiencing physical or emotional symptoms in response to a traumatic event is normal and is called a traumatic stress reaction.

## Physical Symptoms of Traumatic Stress

Anyone affected by the hurricanes or other traumatic stress may experience:

- Fatigue
- Being easily startled
- Headaches
- Sweating
- Gastro-intestinal problems

## Emotional Symptoms of Traumatic Stress

Those affected by traumatic stress may feel:

- Fear
- Anger
- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Reduced awareness
- Feeling like you are numb or not part of the world
- Helplessness
- Hopelessness

## What is PTSD?

PTSD stands for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This is similar to a stress reaction and, in fact, many people who have experienced a traumatic event do develop PTSD. Those with PTSD may experience many of the same emotional and physical symptoms as those with a traumatic stress reaction. Those with PTSD, however, experience trauma along with intense fear, helplessness or horror and then develop intrusive symptoms (such as flashbacks or nightmares). Their symptoms will last more than a month and get in the way of normal life.

Traumatic stress is not uncommon. In fact:

- About 70 % of U.S. adults have experienced a severe traumatic event at least once in their life and one out of five go on to develop symptoms of PTSD
- Approximately 8% of all adults have suffered from PTSD at any one time
- If you include children and teens, an estimated 5% of all Americans will develop PTSD during their lifetime or more than 13 million people
- About one in 10 women will develop PTSD symptoms during their lifetime or double the rate for men because they are much more likely to be victims of domestic violence, rape or abuse.
- Almost 17% of men and 13% of women have experienced more than three traumatic events during their life.

## The Mind/Body Connection

Suffering traumatic stress can affect your emotions as well as your body and the two are so connected that it can be hard to tell the difference. For instance, traumatic stress can cause you to lose concentration, forget things, or have trouble sleeping. It may be difficult to determine on your own whether these symptoms are because you do not feel well physically or because you are still upset. Traumatic stress also can lead you to eat in unhealthy ways or to eat foods that are not healthy, and those eating patterns can affect how you sleep or how your stomach feels. Stress can cause headaches, but the pain from the headaches can also make your stress worsen.

Because the body and the mind work in concert, traumatic stress can cause a cycle that makes it seem like the body and mind are working against one another, worsening symptoms like pain and fatigue.

## Coping with Traumatic Stress

There are things you can do to help yourself if you have suffered traumatic stress as a result of an event such as a school shooting.

- Give yourself time to heal. Anticipate that this will be a difficult time in your life. Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have experienced. Try to be patient with changes in your emotional state.
- Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen and empathize with your situation. But keep in mind that your typical support system may be weakened if those who are close to you also have

experienced or witnessed the trauma.

- Communicate your experience in whatever ways feel comfortable to you - such as by talking with family or close friends, or keeping a diary.
- Find out about local support groups that often are available such as for those who have suffered from natural disasters. These can be especially helpful for people with limited personal support systems.
- Try to find groups led by appropriately trained and experienced professionals such as psychologists. Group discussion can help people realize that other individuals in the same circumstances often have similar reactions and emotions.
- Engage in healthy behaviors to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress. Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience ongoing difficulties with sleep, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Establish or reestablish routines such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. This can be especially important when the normal routines of daily life are disrupted. Even if you are in a shelter and unable to return home, establish routines that can bring comfort. Take some time off from the demands of daily life by pursuing hobbies or other enjoyable activities.
- Help those you can. Helping others, even during your own time of distress, can give you a sense of control and can make you feel better about yourself.
- Avoid major life decisions such as switching careers or jobs if possible because these activities tend to be highly stressful.

### When Should I Seek Professional Help?

Many people are able to cope effectively with the emotional and physical demands brought about by a natural disaster by using their own support systems. It is not unusual, however, to find that serious problems persist and continue to interfere with daily living. For example, some may feel overwhelming nervousness or lingering sadness that adversely affects job performance and interpersonal relationships.

Individuals with prolonged reactions that disrupt their daily functioning should consult with a trained and experienced mental health professional. Psychologists and other appropriate mental health providers help educate people about common responses to extreme stress. These professionals work with individuals affected by trauma to help them find constructive ways of dealing with the emotional impact.

With children, continual and aggressive emotional outbursts, serious problems at school, preoccupation with the traumatic event, continued and extreme withdrawal, and other signs of intense anxiety or emotional difficulties all point to the need for professional assistance. A qualified mental health professional such as a psychologist can help such children and their parents understand and deal with thoughts, feelings and behaviors that result from trauma.

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