

Coping with Trauma

Psychological “trauma” occurs when a person experiences a very upsetting, negative event. Usually traumas are unexpected, the person is unprepared, and there is nothing the person can do to prevent the trauma from occurring. Sometimes the person is a witness to that event, as when a person observes a car accident. Other times, the person’s life is threatened, as when a person is robbed at gunpoint or sexually assaulted. Some traumas consist of a single event, such as an accident, severe illness, earthquake, mugging, or fire. Other traumas are ongoing, such as childhood physical or emotional abuse.

Emotional Impact

Immediate Reactions

Many of the immediate reactions to trauma are actually adaptive in the short term.

- Denial allows the person to function while the threat is occurring.
- Dissociation and depersonalization are an emotional distancing commonly experienced in traumatic circumstances, in which a person feels detached from their own experience, feeling “outside their own body” as if watching someone else experiences an upsetting event.
- Derealization is an experience where the traumatized person has a change in how they experience their surroundings, resulting in a feeling of numbness, detachment, and of being cut off from their immediate surroundings. They can distinguish between what is and is not real, but feel removed from the immediate situation.

Soon After the Trauma

As the immediate shock of a trauma wears off, people often experience emotions that are uncomfortable, though understandable. They may come and go.

- Weeping
- Shaking
- Generalized anxiety or panic
- Feeling in danger
- Sadness
- Anger
- Sleep disturbance
- Suspiciousness
- Elevated startle response
- Intrusive recall of trauma
- Shame

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

During a traumatic experience, people adapt by using skills and emotions to help them survive the immediate threat. There seem to be physiological changes in the brain and hormones which help them survive the trauma. The problem comes after the trauma, when the emotions and strategies that were adaptive during the trauma are no longer functional. Recovery involves recognizing what responses are and aren't functional and getting rid of the ones that hurt you. Without recovery, people endure ongoing discomfort, and behave in ways that further complicate their lives. Friendships may fail, academics or work success may decline, and general happiness disappears.

Common Symptoms of PTSD:

- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Early morning awakening
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Difficulty concentrating
- Clumsiness or carelessness
- Alcohol abuse
- Constant worrying
- Irritability or angry outbursts
- Questioning of religious faith
- Apathy – “I just don’t care”
- Obsessions about personal safety or that of loved ones
- Depressed mood, low energy, low motivation
- Self-criticism
- Helplessness, powerlessness, lack of control
- Re-experiencing previous traumas or upsetting events
- Difficulty being affectionate
- Avoiding people, places, situations related to the trauma

When to Get Professional Help:

It appears that talking through the trauma soon after the event may prevent post-traumatic stress disorder. Following ANY trauma, people are encouraged to seek counseling within a week.

For traumas that occurred previously, counseling is recommended to:

- Help the person understand the traumatic event
- Review the trauma in a safe setting with a patient, caring professional develop strategies for reducing symptoms
- Develop strategies for reducing symptoms
- Increase resiliency and coping skills

How Can I Help My Friend Who Has Experienced a Trauma?

Here are some general suggestions:

- Listen compassionately and actively.
- Reassure the person that you are willing to help.
- Do not criticize the person's reaction ("you ought to be angry").
- Do not minimize the trauma, or their level of distress.
- Do not say you know just how they feel.
- Do not insist they are blameless.
- Do not interfere with the person's actions unless it endangers them or someone else.
- Realize that you, too, are affected by their trauma, and you may need help, too.
- If your friend's symptoms are more extreme or longer lasting than seems healthy, encourage them to consider counseling. You may also consult the Counseling Center about how to help your friend.

For More Information

Union College students are invited to schedule confidential counseling sessions with an experienced, caring psychologist for help in coping with trauma. Appointments can be made by stopping by the Wicker Wellness Center front desk, or by calling (518) 388-6161.