

Trauma and Mental Health

Traumatic events include any event that involves actual or possible death or serious injury, such as natural disasters, combat, car accidents, or other threats of violence or harm. You can experience trauma in several different ways. The traumatic event may directly happen to you, or you may see or hear about a traumatic event happening to someone else, such as a colleague, friend, or loved one. Some people may be impacted by traumatic events in the course of their professional work. In medical settings, healthcare professionals may experience trauma by seeing or hearing about stressful events that happen to patients, such as serious injury, illness, abuse, or death. Healthcare providers may experience traumatic stress reactions related to conflict or distress about treatment plans, diagnoses, or behaviors that they witness or directly experience. People may also experience some indirect effects of trauma by hearing about distressing world events.

People respond to trauma in a wide variety of ways. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to respond to trauma. It is normal to have some reactions after experiencing a shocking and distressing event. Traumatic events activate the “fight-flight-freeze” system in our bodies, which includes various emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual/moral reactions:

Physical Sensations

- Tightness in chest
- Stomach unsettled
- Feeling “on edge” or easily startled
- Restlessness
- Difficulty sleeping

Thoughts

- “This isn’t real”
- “This wasn’t supposed to happen”
- “I can’t stop thinking about it”
- “It’s not fair”
- “Why did this happen?”

Feelings

- Numbness
- Sadness
- Anger/Irritability
- Anxiety
- Fear
- Guilt
- Shame
- Overwhelmed
- Helplessness
- Vulnerability

Behaviors

- Difficulty concentrating
- Avoiding reminders of the event
- Withdrawing from others
- Nightmares

Meaning and Purpose

- Looking for meaning and to make sense of the traumatic event
- Crisis of faith or experiencing doubt
- Questioning all aspects of life

Recovery and healing will take time, and will be unique to each individual. For many people, the distressing reactions to the traumatic event will gradually lessen over time. There are also many effective, evidence-based treatments available, including psychotherapy and medications.

Support, understanding, and skillful guidance after a traumatic event can make a difference. That support may come from family, friends, spiritual resources, communities, and/or a counselor. Other ways to care for yourself after a traumatic event include: practicing healthy ways of coping (e.g., exercise, meditation, being in nature, and other ways that you have used in the past to cope with distress), accepting help with practical responsibilities (e.g., transportation, household tasks), and trying to maintain optimism, hope, and faith.

At the Office of Counseling and Workplace Resilience, we provide compassionate care to members of our Michigan Medicine community who have experienced trauma and stressful events. We are here to help.