

What is trauma?



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Being exposed to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence can be traumatic. Almost everyone who experiences trauma will be emotionally affected but we don't all respond the same. With the help of family and friends, most of us are OK in a week or two but for others, the effects are longer lasting.

Traumatic events include:

- a serious accident, physical assault, war, a natural disaster, sexual assault or abuse
- witnessing these happening to someone else
- learning a friend or family member was involved in a life threatening event, was seriously injured or has suddenly died due to an assault or an accident.

Traumatic events are common

Most people experience at least one traumatic event in their lives. The most common in Australia are:

- unexpected death of someone close to you
- seeing someone badly injured or killed, or unexpectedly seeing a dead body
- a life-threatening car accident.

Traumatic events cover a broad range of experiences. For example, a car accident is a one-off, sudden and unexpected event while childhood sexual abuse can happen repeatedly and over a long time. Both are distressing and can lead to posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Traumatic events are often overwhelming, hard to come to terms with and likely to be very different from anything previously endured. Trauma can be hard to make sense of and can make people doubt things they've always believed, like that the world is a safe place, people are generally good or they are in control of what happens to them. When people talk about their world being shattered after a traumatic event, they are usually talking about these beliefs being shattered.

Other stressful events, like relationship breakdowns or losing a loved one to natural causes, can affect a person's mental health but aren't thought of as being traumatic in the same way as events above. This is important because treating trauma is different to treating mental health problems arising from other stressful life events.



What to expect after a trauma

In the first days and weeks after a traumatic event, people often experience strong feelings of fear, sadness, guilt, anger, or grief. People can also experience a range of other physical, mental and emotional and behavioural reactions. These can include:

- nightmares
- unwanted memories of the event
- avoiding talking about the event
- avoiding reminders of the event
- feeling in a state of 'high alert'
- difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- feeling irritable or angry
- feeling emotionally numb and detached from others
- physical reactions such as:
 - pounding heart
 - nausea
 - shaking or sweating when reminded to the event
 - changes in mood and thinking.

For a lot of people, these reactions will begin to reduce after a few weeks, and with the support of family and friends, the person recovers. However, some people will continue to experience high levels of distress and may develop a posttraumatic mental health condition. It is important to talk to your doctor about what you are experiencing if you don't begin to return to normal after three or four weeks. Without psychological treatment these reactions will not resolve by themselves.

For more information

- Talk to your GP.
- For immediate help, call Lifeline on 13 11 14.