

## Trauma

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### *What Are Traumas?*

Traumas are significantly negative events from which we experience a variety of psychological and emotional responses. Traumatic events can range from being involved or witnessing an accident, to losing a loved one, or having an injury or illness that we feel jeopardizes our well-being and/or sense of security and safety in the world.

Emotional and psychological traumas are the result of the extraordinarily stressful events that can leave us struggling with upsetting emotions, memories, and anxiety, as well as feelings of numbness and disconnection. <sup>1</sup> Often after a traumatic event, we find ourselves questioning our relationships with others, the world in general, and ourselves as we try to make sense of the negative experience.

Traumatic events can be single events (such as an accident, injury, natural disaster, or assault) or ongoing, persistent stresses (such as experiencing repeated bullying, domestic violence, childhood neglect, living in a war-torn or crime-ridden community, or battling a life-threatening illness). They can also be interpersonal (occurring between or because of people) or non-interpersonal as well as intentional or accidental. We do not necessarily have to directly experience the traumatic event in order to have a traumatic response to it. For example, watching videos on school shooting or violence perpetrated by police officers on Black individuals can overwhelm our nervous system and create traumatic stress.

### *Mental Health and Trauma*

Trauma can cause a variety of psychological and physical symptoms including:

- Difficulty concentrating, confusion
- Shock, denial, or disbelief,
- Exhaustion and irritability
- Anxiety
- Depression or feeling sad, helpless, or hopeless
- Feeling disconnected or numb
- Guilt, shame, self-blame
- Anger, mood swings
- Forgetfulness
- Apathy
- Doubting deeply held beliefs about safety, intimacy, trust, control, and esteem
- Racing heartbeat
- Muscle tension
- Insomnia or nightmares
- Being easily startled
- Fatigue

The majority of people who experience a trauma will not develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and will be able to recover within a few weeks. Individuals who have experienced multiple traumas, particularly traumas that occurred during early childhood, or individuals who

<sup>1</sup> Robinson, L., Smith, M., Segal, J. (Updated February, 2020) <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/coping-with-emotional-and-psychological-trauma.htm>

are already burdened by a lot of stress, can have an increased likelihood of having a traumatic response to a traumatic event.

### *Historical and Intergenerational Trauma*

Historical trauma is multigenerational trauma experienced by a specific cultural, racial or ethnic group.<sup>2</sup> It refers to the cumulative emotional and psychological harm that have caused a traumatic experience or event to a community of people such as colonization, slavery, genocide, and the Holocaust. Traumatic events can shape our DNA and the traumatic responses that previous generations accumulated in the survival of a negative event can be passed down through the family which can lead to an increased likelihood to become dependent on substances or have certain health conditions.

### *Racial Trauma*

Racial Trauma refers to the stressful impact or emotional pain of one's experience with racism and discrimination.<sup>3</sup> It occurs as a result of witnessing or experiencing discrimination, racism, or structural prejudice (also known as institutional racism). These types of events can significantly impact mental health and behavior such as being more vigilant and suspicious of others, increased sensitivity to threat, difficulty contemplating a future, and other maladaptive responses to stress, such as increased aggression or substance use. Since racial traumas are often not isolated events and have long histories of being integrated into social systems and institutions, the multiple layers of traumas increase the likelihood of negative impacts. Racial disparities can cause additional struggles in many aspects of society including the ability to achieve in an academic setting.

### *Is COVID-19 A Trauma?*

Since COVID-19 is a global pandemic that has threatened our health, caused societal shutdowns, led to significant job loss and economic depressions which has resulted in an increased sense of uncertainty, stress, and fear, it can most definitely be considered a traumatic event and produce trauma symptoms for some people. It can also exacerbate ongoing traumas or revitalized old traumatic wounds. This means that during this time, we may feel more tense, fearful, and unable to regulate our emotions or concentrate.

### *Trauma Recovery*

Trauma symptoms typically last for a few days to a couple of month and often gradually fade as the trauma ends and you are able to process the event. However, sometimes particular parts of the trauma may stay with us longer and may become triggers (i.e., something that reminds you of your traumatic experience and alerts a danger signal in your body).

<sup>2</sup>Administration for Children and Families: U.S. Department of Health & Human Services  
<https://www.acf.hhs.gov/trauma-toolkit/trauma-concept>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/addressing\\_race\\_and\\_trauma\\_in\\_the\\_classroom\\_educators.pdf](https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/addressing_race_and_trauma_in_the_classroom_educators.pdf)

Part of recovering from trauma is allowing yourself to grieve the experience whether or not the traumatic event resulted in a death. Traumatic events change us, and it is important that we allow ourselves to acknowledge whatever was lost from a sense of safety to the loss of a loved one.

### *General Trauma Recovery Tips*

- **Move your body:** Trauma disrupts our bodies natural equilibrium keeping us in state of hyperarousal and fear. Movement can help repair your nervous system and burn off adrenaline and release endorphins. <sup>4</sup>
- **Practice mindfulness:** Breathe. Help yourself stay mentally present by continually bringing your mind back to the present moment. Notice your thoughts and feelings without judgement and pay attention to your physical sensations.
- **Care for your wellness:** While trauma can disrupt sleep, lack of quality sleep can exacerbate your trauma symptoms and make it harder to regulate your emotions. Drink enough water, eat nourishing foods, and try to reduce other stresses in your life as you process the experience
- **Seek support:** Trauma often makes us want to isolate but it is through our relationships that we heal. Reach out to supportive friends or family members, join a support group, participate in social activities, or volunteer
- **Try not to avoid:** In response to trauma we often want to not think about the event and avoid reminders of it. However, we cannot avoid our minds so, when safe, allow yourself to acknowledge the trauma and your feelings about it. Tend to your mental health with kindness by reminding yourself how you survived, of your current safety, and how you will always do your best to protect yourself. Trauma symptoms are not trying to harm you, they are your bodies way of trying to keep you safe. The more we avoid reminder of the trauma, the smaller our world gets. Gradually expose yourself to non-threatening aspects of your trauma to help you differentiate between what was and was not actually life threatening during the experience (e.g., if you were assaulted in a ramp, allow yourself to go back to a ramp to help your brain remember that ramps are not dangerous in-and-of itself).

### *Racial Trauma Recovery Tips*

- **Seek out or build a support network:** Find a group of people who you feel understand you and can relate to your experience.
- **Recognize the personal impact of the stressors on you:** Trauma impacts each person uniquely. Try to identify what is it about this experience that is causing you distress.
- **Build a mental health tool kit:** create a list or a box can remind yourself of supportive activities, places, statements, and people as well as comfort items
- **Unplug from social media and take days off as needed.** Give yourself space to process your own feelings and build up your resilience
- **Utilize spiritual resources:** Connect with God, pray, or seek support from a spiritual leader for guidance
- **Become involved in social action:** Figure out where and how you can be a source of change and support to others

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/coping-with-emotional-and-psychological-trauma.htm>

- Try not to minimize or ignore your experience: It matters.
- Seek out healing practices related to your cultural identity: Not everyone heals the same and different communities practice different ways of healing. Learn about how your community has sought to heal

#### *COVID-19 Recovery Tips:*

- Focus on what is in your control
- Acknowledge your thoughts and feelings
- Assess your risk of getting COVID and the risk of those you interact with regularly
- Spend time considering what is important for you at this time and consider how to get those needs met safely
- Build a network of support

#### *When to Seek Professional Support*

Trauma recovery takes time but does not necessarily require professional help. However, if after a few weeks or months have passed and your symptoms are not letting up, you may want to consult with a professional. Additional reasons to seek support include:

- Having trouble functioning at home, work, or school
- Suffering from severe fear, anxiety or depression,
- Unable to enjoy previously satisfying activities or relationships
- Experiencing terrifying memories, nightmares, or flashbacks
- Avoiding place of reminders of your trauma
- Feeling emotionally numb and disconnected
- Relying on alcohol or drugs to cope
- Have additional traumas that feel compounded by the recent trauma

#### *Resources*

SAMHSA: Tips for College Students: After A Disaster or Other Trauma  
<https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma13-4778.pdf>

HelpGuide: Emotional and Psychological Trauma <https://www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/coping-with-emotional-and-psychological-trauma.htm>

UCSD Weill Institute for Neurosciences: Emotional Well-Being and Coping During COVID-19  
<https://psychiatry.ucsf.edu/coronavirus/coping>

#### *At University of Iowa*

University Counseling Service: <https://counseling.uiowa.edu>

The Seashore Clinic: <https://psychology.uiowa.edu/seashore-clinic>

Women's Resource and Action Center: <https://wrac.uiowa.edu/help/>

Rape Victims Advocacy Program: <https://rvap.uiowa.edu>