



## Understanding the Nature of Trauma and PTSD

By

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Unfortunately, traumatic experiences are a relatively common event. Current estimates are that as many as 70% of adults in the U.S. have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetimes. Given the number of veterans who have experienced combat, the frequency and intensity of recent natural disasters, and the tragedies associated with the recent events in Boston and Newtown, these numbers are not surprising.

While anyone can experience trauma, not all people perceive traumatic events in the same way. Some are able to manage these events relatively well, while others experience significant distress as the result of traumatic events. It is currently estimated that as many as 20% of people that experience a traumatic event will develop Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Some estimates are even higher (between 30 and 60%) for those who have experienced a disaster, such as a hurricane, industrial accident, or a terror attack. In addition, be-

tween 5 to 20% of rescue workers of these events tend to experience PTSD within a year of the traumatic event.

### Trauma and Memory

Trauma from an event is so stressful that it overwhelms our normal coping mechanisms. As a result, thoughts and feelings that occurred during the trauma can get anchored internally and cause us to think in distorted ways. For example, you might see a burning building and naturally think "I have to get everyone out of the building". If, however, you are unsuccessful, the thought might become "people were hurt because I wasn't able to get everyone out." Clearly, you didn't cause the building to burn, yet because of the overwhelming nature of the traumatic event, you might begin to feel guilty and responsible for the losses that occurred.

Research indicates that traumatic events tend to be encoded within the limbic system of the brain, which primarily processes emotions and sensations, rather

than language or speech. As a result, people who experience trauma often don't have the words to describe their experiences. Unfortunately, if they can't put into words their experiences, it may lead to PTSD.

### Treatment Helps

Therapy can be very effective in helping individuals' overcome the effects of trauma in their lives. During therapy, individuals are able to work through the memories of the trauma and diminish the intensity of the emotions and thoughts that may have become "frozen in time." Therapy often helps individuals find the words for their experiences. This allows them to engage the cognitive portions of the brain, which is generally responsible for language and reasoning. The more we can make sense of the trauma the more we are able to overcome its after-effects.



their skin is crawling, or that they are "dirty" and that no one would want them. These feelings are often directly related to the past trauma, but may not be immediately obvious because of the disconnect between the thoughts, feelings, and "pictures".

This disconnect can be overcome by working through the trauma, learning to identify the triggers, and developing strategies to be less affected by the triggers.

## Flashbacks and Body Memories

Many people with PTSD report re-experiencing extreme thoughts, feelings, or body sensations when they have "flashbacks" or "pictures" that they can't get out of their head. These "flashbacks" might get "triggered" by anything that reminds them of the traumatic event. When triggered, a person with PTSD may experience these sensations or memories with the same level of intensity that occurred during the original trauma. As a result, the intensity of their reactions may not match the cur-

rent situation that they are in. This can obviously have a significant negative impact on a person's ability to thrive in intimate, social or work relationships.

In addition, sometimes the thoughts, feelings and body sensations become disconnected from the "pictures" that are associated with the trauma. As a result, a person with PTSD may get "triggered", but not initially realize it. For example, a sexual abuse survivor that begins an intimate relationship might begin to feel like

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### What You Can't Put Into Words, You Can't Put to Rest

Words are the best tool we have to deal with emotions. The more we are able to process thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and experiences with the higher level thinking within the brain, the better we tend to cope. The more we can understand the trauma, the more we can put it to rest. Be willing to verbalize your experiences, even if the words are inadequate to describe what you have gone through. Remember, we have an amazing ability to heal from trauma, if we use the resources that we have. Words are one of those resources. Be willing to use them.



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**10 Steps to Building Resiliency**

Resiliency is the ability to adapt to the stressors and challenges of life in a healthy way. People that are resilient have the ability to “bounce back” after tragedy or trauma. Below are listed 10 strategies to develop resiliency.

1. **Develop meaningful relationships** - Having strong social and/or spiritual connections and strong support systems is often a vital component of resiliency.
2. **Develop positive role models** - Having role models can help you learn how to manage challenges in a healthy way.
3. **Develop confidence by developing new skills** - Your confidence will grow when you have successes. You will have more successes as you develop new skills. Be willing to learn new things and embrace challenges as an opportunity to develop new skills.
4. **Develop a positive attitude** - If you approach life with a sense of dread it is hard to develop resilience. Change your attitude and work to be positive in your approach to challenges. Develop the “we will overcome” approach to adversity.
5. **Develop good problem solving skills** - Be willing to explore new ways of doing things and learn from other’s mistakes. Approach adversity from a solutions oriented perspective.
6. **Be hopeful and optimistic** - Being optimistic doesn’t mean that you are avoiding the problems. It just means that you maintain an awareness that setbacks are a part of life and that you have the ability to overcome these setbacks.
7. **Heal past hurts and wounds** - It is easier to overcome adversity if we feel strong internally. Be willing to heal old emotional wounds so that you can free up internal resources to face life’s challenges.
8. **Develop a sense of purpose in your life** - We tend to be more hopeful and resilient when we feel our life has meaning and purpose.
9. **Develop a sense of humor** - Learning to laugh is an important part of being resilient.
10. **Take care of yourself** - If you don’t take care of yourself, who will?

**Normal Experiences Associated With Trauma  
Vs.  
Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**

**Normal Experience Associated with Trauma**

Trauma can happen to anyone. As a result, it is useful to understand some of the normal experiences that people have when they experience trauma. Listed below are 10 common experiences associated with trauma.

1. Confusion and Disorientation
2. Loss of Control
3. Feeling vulnerable and exposed
4. Guilt
5. Grief
6. Frustration
7. Anger
8. Fear of the traumatic event happening again
9. Shame and rage over being vulnerable

10. Rage at the source or cause of the incident

If these feelings and experiences are processed successfully, they tend to fade over time. Most people are able to recover from trauma fairly quickly and return to their previous level of functioning.

**Symptoms of PTSD**

Some people struggle to overcome the effects of trauma and develop PTSD. Common symptoms of PTSD include:

- A re-experiencing of the traumatic event. If you have PTSD you may feel like you “re-live” the traumatic event and that the trauma “just happened” even after years have passed.
- Avoiding anything that reminds you of the trauma.

- Becoming emotionally “numb” in order to cope.
- Loss of interest in activities and becoming detached.
- Having difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep and having nightmares.
- Becoming easily angered or agitated.
- Becoming hypervigilant or easily startled.
- Becoming depressed and anxious.

If you or someone you know experiences these symptoms, seek help. Treatment can help alleviate these symptoms and help you return to a better life.



**Debriefing Helps**

When trauma occurs, it is important to be able to find a way to make sense of the experiences. Debriefing allows individuals the opportunity to verbalize their thoughts and feelings so that the trauma doesn’t become internalized. The best time to initiate this debriefing is often within the first 24 to 72 hours of the trauma. When done by a trained professional, a debriefing can help individuals regain a sense of control and return to sense of “normalcy”.