

Questions?

Call 206-598-4370

Your questions are important. Call your doctor or health care provider if you have questions or concerns. UWMC clinic staff are also available to help at any time.

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Traumatic stress can happen to anyone, and can affect your life in major ways. Read this handout to learn what causes traumatic stress, who gets it, signs and symptoms, and how to cope with a traumatic event.

Patient Education

Social Work and Care Coordination

Traumatic Stress

What it is and how to cope with it

What is a traumatic event?

A *traumatic event* is something that may bring on an increased and long lasting amount of stress. The event *may be personal* such as an accident, the death or injury of a close family member or friend, a physical assault, or even an earthquake or flood. It may also be *something you see or hear about*, such as an accident, or someone hurt in a war or disaster. An event like this often happens without warning and may be fully beyond your control. The event may be brief, and happen only once, or it may be prolonged and may happen over and over again.

Who experiences traumatic stress?

Traumatic stress can happen to anyone. The same event may cause different levels of stress in different people – from intense and prolonged to little or even none. Most people seem to cope well with trauma and have just a few, short-lived symptoms. For others, the response may come right after the first event, or may be delayed by weeks or even months. Symptoms may last for a very short time or go on for months. A long-lasting, intense physical and emotional response to traumatic stress is commonly known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The more severe the trauma, the more likely you are to experience traumatic stress. The reality and intensity of your own stress response depends on your life experiences, age, physical and mental health, and many other factors.

Knowing that some physical and emotional reactions to a traumatic event are part of the body's *normal coping process* can help in the recovery process. Knowing common, normal responses to traumatic events can help you to recognize them in yourself and in others. It is also normal for people to react in opposite ways to an event. One person may have a problem sleeping, while someone else may sleep more. One person may lose their appetite, but another may have an increased appetite.

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What are some common reactions to traumatic stress?

- Symptoms that do not last long.
- Sleep problems, like not sleeping well, sleeping too much, or having nightmares.
- Aches and pains in the head, stomach, or back.
- Digestive problems like an upset stomach, vomiting, or hard or loose bowel movements.
- Changes in eating patterns.
- Mood swings.
- Anxiety and fear.
- Feeling more cranky or irritable than usual.
- Depression.
- Grief.
- Shame or self-blame.
- Feeling guilty for living through an event when others died or were badly injured.
- Keeping to yourself, avoiding others.
- Lack of emotion in general.
- Denial of the event or your response to it.
- Avoiding reading or talking about what happened.
- Focusing too much on the event, whether you mean to or not.
- Re-experiencing the event.
- Increased high-risk behavior or an increased need to control things in your life.
- Overworking or having problems working.
- Difficulty focusing.
- Having trouble making decisions.
- Abusing drugs or alcohol.

If symptoms persist or you feel you need professional help, call your primary health care provider or one of the resources on the “Local Resource Guide” insert.

How can I deal with traumatic stress?

Traumatic stress is a normal response. It is a way for you to process a sudden traumatic event so that you will be able to deal with it in time.

The key parts of coping with traumatic stress are:

Education – Recognize signs and symptoms and where to go for proper treatment.

A Broad Approach – Look at physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual issues.

Social Support – Seek help through friends, family, and group treatment.

Here are some helpful ways for managing and overcoming traumatic stress for both traumatized people and their family and friends:

- Look for and understand common reactions to traumatic stress (see page 2).
- Talk about the event with good listeners – friends, family, clergy, and counselors.
- Keep a daily journal, writing your thoughts and feelings about the event.
- Express the event in some art form – such as writing, painting, quilting, or music.
- Remember it is OK to cry.
- Look for humor and positive things in daily life.
- Try to keep and build positive relationships with caring people.
- Avoid keeping to yourself.
- Stay active and follow a normal routine.
- Eat a healthy diet, exercise, and sleep regularly.
- Commit to something that is meaningful to you every day.
- Try to neither focus on nor avoid people, places, or things that make you think of what happened.
- Resolve minor stressors of daily life to decrease overall stress levels.
- Take time for treats, such as hot baths, books or movies, and small amounts of comfort foods.
- Avoid overusing caffeine, sugar, nicotine, or alcohol.