



Coping with Exposure to Trauma and Difficult Graphic Content

Traumatic event

A traumatic event is a situation in which a person is exposed to a direct threat of death or severe injury to themselves and/or their loved ones. Exposure to a traumatic event can occur when the person is directly experiencing it or witnessing or learning that the event has happened to a loved one. It can also occur when professionals - such as first responders, police officers, mental health professionals - are repeatedly exposed to aversive details of a traumatic event. Traumatic events can lead to the development of an acute stress response and, over time, even post-traumatic stress disorder.

War exposes entire populations to a prolonged state of imminent threat to life, in other words, a "Continuous Traumatic Threat." In this situation, the individual focuses on survival, self-preservation, and safeguarding the immediate surroundings from the external threat.

Typical Responses to Living in the Shade (Dark Cloud) of Continuous Traumatic Threat

The response to a period of **continuous** threat is varied and multidimensional. It changes from person to person and moment to moment, manifesting in various ways. It has broad systemic effects, affecting multiple domains, including cognitive, emotional, physiological, and behavioral.

Many of these behaviors are effective and adaptive to the situation. Most people actively respond to protect themselves and minimize potential harm from the threat. They seek and even create secure spaces, take precautions against danger, care for others, seek information, and more.

Common Reactions:

- **Physical reactions:** heart racing, shortness of breath, excessive sweating, muscle tension, tremors, digestive issues, dry mouth, diarrhea, loss of appetite, frequent urination, etc. In the long term, psychosomatic pain such as headaches, muscle tension, lowered immune system, and physical disease.
- **Emotional reactions:** constant feelings of danger, anxiety, fear, nervousness, and anger. Some may experience numbness, sadness, and difficulty feeling positive emotions. There may also be mood swings between extreme emotions, a sense of disconnection, sensory dullness, and low awareness of the environment to the point of, in severe cases, perceiving reality differently from average (for example, feeling that time passes very slowly), or feeling as if one is observing themselves from outside their body.
- **Cognitive reactions:** impaired attention and concentration, confusion, memory impairment, sometimes only in the event context – meaning being unable to recall specific details or certain parts of specific traumatic events. Difficulty in decision-making and judgment is also common. Additionally, there's a tendency to think negatively, both about oneself – feeling a lack of worth, self-blame, and shame (regarding reactions during a specific event or adapting after the event) – and about the environment – thinking that others don't understand, losing trust in others, and imagining the worst scenarios. Many of these difficulties stem from a shift in cognitive function from higher-order thinking to survival-focused functions.
- **Behavioral reactions:** restlessness, increased agitation, jumpiness, detachment, replaying events along with behavior and continuous thoughts about the threat and ways to defend against it, outbursts of crying and anger, difficulty falling asleep and sleeping. Excessive activity and difficulty in calming down, excessive talking, and, on the other hand, reduction in specific behavioral patterns - such as avoidance behavior, silence, slowing down in activity, withdrawal from hobbies and lack of interest in leisure activities, social withdrawal from family and friends, seclusion, and avoidance of going out to avoid feeling exposed to danger.

It's important to remember that many of the symptoms listed above are expected responses to a difficult and "abnormal" reality or event.

Not everyone exposed to or reacting to events will develop post-traumatic stress disorder or another chronic illness.

Even in difficult situations, most symptoms tend to diminish over time.



When is it recommended to seek professional help?

- If a person expresses several kinds of symptoms from the variety mentioned above;
- If symptom expression intensity is significantly higher than the environment and basic functionality is impaired;
- If the symptoms persist over time without relief.

What can be done to cope?

Even during this time, several actions can be taken to cope better with the symptoms and feelings of worry and anxiety, as well as to reduce the buildup of stress in the body.

The first critical step is to ensure physical safety: **to take care of ourselves and our loved ones to the best of our ability** - follow the authorities' instructions and avoid unnecessary risks.

The second step is to normalize reactions to the situation: remember that after a traumatic and difficult event, there is expected to be a reaction that could be considered normal to such a situation. In emergencies and disasters, time is an essential part of healing. The production of stress hormones, such as adrenaline, decreases over time, and fear and distress diminish. Sometimes, they are replaced by adaptation and even growth.

Additionally, you can enhance self-regulation skills, connect with the community around you (family, friends, and the community), and encourage hope.

Help the body return to a state of balance and resilience

1. **Gathering information** is crucial and can even save lives. It allows you to assess the situation, evaluate risks, and determine coping methods. It's essential to stay informed and receive your information from reliable sources. However, at the same time, it's important to minimize media consumption.
2. **Reducing exposure to media and information on social networks** - it's important to remember that being exposed to distressing reports and images can impact our ability to cope and leave a negative impression that may last for a long time. It's possible to stay updated with what's happening a few times a day; in addition, it's preferable to do so through the radio and/or newspapers. Managing your exposure is especially significant in



the context of social networks. It's advisable to avoid distressing images. If such images come your way, don't forward them and delete them to prevent revisiting them and viewing such material.

- 3. Physical activity** - particularly aerobic exercise, releases hormones that help regulate stress. Despite the security limitations, there are plenty of physical activities you can participate in.
- 4. Breathing** - during stress, breathing can become shallow, which does not provide enough oxygen to the body. Breathing exercises can help bring more oxygen into the body and regulate the functionality of the amygdala (a part of the brain that acts like a panic button). You can try pausing your breath and then exhaling slowly and steadily, paying attention to the outgoing air. Repeat this process several times.
You can also perform a breathing exercise several times a day: inhale through your nose for 5 seconds, hold your breath for 4 seconds, exhale through your mouth for 8 seconds, and then hold for an additional 4 seconds.
- 5. Using your body can also help** - rubbing your hands together, self-massaging the tip of your nose, shrugging your shoulders towards your ears for 10 seconds, releasing with a slow breath, clenching your fists and releasing, and vigorous handshaking are other physical ways to return regulation.
- 6. Imagination** - in difficult moments, you can immerse yourself in good memories of places, events, and people whose memories can bring a smile and give you a sense of security.

Connect with your community and loved ones in your surroundings. Being together with others preserves and strengthens us, replenishing our resources.

- 1. Increase** your **contact and shared activities** with your loved ones.
- 2. Share and express** - talk about your experiences, even the difficult ones, with friends and loved ones as much as you feel comfortable.
- 3. Think about the role you can play** in your environment, even a small but necessary role, which can bring a sense of well-being.
- 4. Get involved in the community**, in volunteering activities that suit you. Find someone in your surroundings who might be struggling a bit more than you and help them.



Maintain an existing routine or create a new one adapted to the emergency

Maintaining basic personal needs, regular nutrition as much as possible, regular contact with family and loved ones, personal hygiene, routine health check-ups, and observing familiar rituals (e.g., morning and bedtime routines, family gatherings, and marking events such as birthdays in an appropriate way for the situation).

Strengthen your sense of hope and meaning for yourself and those around you

1. Divide your long-term coping into shorter chunks of time - for example, until the end of the day, until the end of the week, until the end of a specific stage. For each period, define modest, realistic expectations and achievable strategies to follow. Meeting small goals can instill a sense of capability.
2. Examine what is **currently** under your control in your environment.
3. Think about the meaningful things you have accomplished.

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