



Home (/) > Psychology topics (/topics) > Trauma (/topics/trauma) >

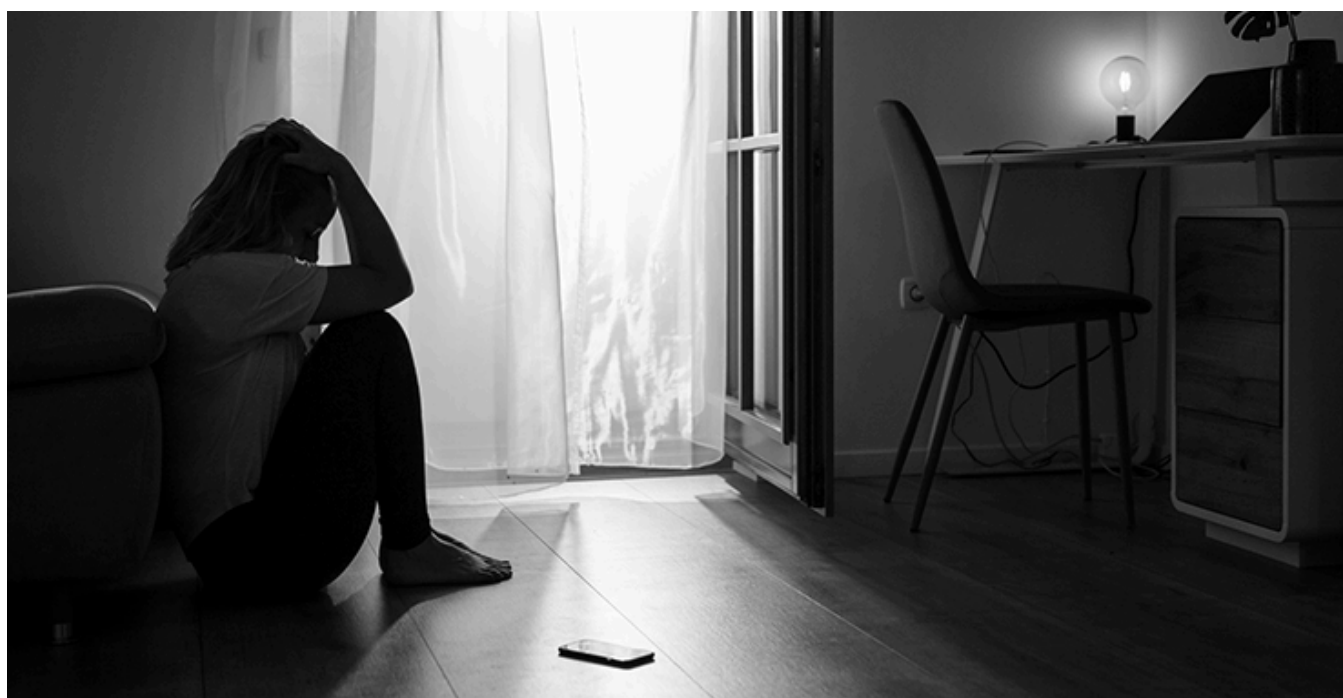
# How to cope with traumatic stress

Psychologists recommend people lean on loved ones, prioritize self-care, and be patient with themselves to help manage the stressful effects of trauma

Last reviewed: October 21, 2024

Date created: October 30, 2019

4 min read



The ongoing war between Israel and Hamas has left many feeling shocked and devastated. Psychological science outlines the immediate and long-term psychological impacts of [violence and trauma \(/topics/trauma\)](/topics/trauma) on the people who are targets, especially civilians.

Research also shows that the fear, anxiety, and traumatic stress from the onslaught of violent daily news from the Middle East can have long-term effects on the health and well-being of those watching the war from afar.

## Common reactions and responses to trauma

How people react and respond to trauma can vary, according to the [National Center for PTSD](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/what/index.asp) (<https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/what/index.asp>).

Following a traumatic event, people frequently feel stunned, disoriented, or unable to integrate distressing information. Once these initial reactions subside, people can experience a variety of thoughts and behaviors. Common responses can be:

- **Intense or unpredictable feelings.** You may be anxious, nervous, overwhelmed, or grief-stricken. You may also feel more irritable or moody than usual.
- **Changes to thoughts and behavior patterns.** You might have repeated and vivid memories of the event. These memories may occur for no apparent reason and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating. It may be difficult to concentrate or make decisions. Sleep and eating patterns also can be disrupted—some people may overeat and oversleep, while others experience a loss of sleep and loss of appetite.
- **Sensitivity to environmental factors.** Sirens, loud noises, or other environmental sensations may stimulate memories of the disaster creating heightened anxiety. These “triggers” may be accompanied by fears that the stressful event will be repeated.
- **Strained interpersonal relationships.** Increased conflict, such as more frequent disagreements with family members and coworkers, can occur. You might also become withdrawn, isolated, or disengaged from your usual social activities.
- **Stress-related physical symptoms.** Headaches, nausea, and chest pain may occur and could require medical attention. Preexisting medical conditions could be affected by disaster-related stress.

## Coping with traumatic stress

The good news is that there are very effective ways to cope with and treat the stressful effects of trauma. Psychologists and other researchers have found that these actions can help:

- **Lean on your loved ones.** Identify friends or family members for support. If you feel ready to discuss the traumatic event, you might talk to them about your experience and your feelings. You can also ask loved ones to help you with household tasks or other obligations to relieve some of your daily stress.
- **Prioritize self-care.** Do your best to eat nutritious meals, get regular physical activity, and get a good night's sleep. And seek out other healthy coping strategies such as art, music, meditation, relaxation, and spending time in nature.
- **Be patient.** It's normal to want to avoid thinking about a traumatic event. But not leaving the house, sleeping excessively, isolating yourself from loved ones, and using substances to escape reminders are not healthy ways to cope over time. Though avoidance is normal, too much of it can prolong your stress and keep you from healing. Gradually, try to ease back into a normal routine. Support from loved ones or a mental health professional can help a lot as you get back in the groove.

## When to seek help

Not everyone requires treatment for traumatic stress. Most people recover on their own with time. However, mental health professionals such as psychologists can help you find healthy ways to cope in the aftermath of a traumatic event.

If your distress is interfering with your relationships, work, or daily functioning, you may have acute stress disorder ([https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/related/acute\\_stress.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/related/acute_stress.asp)) or posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (</ptsd-guideline>).

## Treatments for traumatic stress

Psychologists can provide evidence-based interventions to help you cope with traumatic stress or acute stress disorder.

One is Psychological First Aid (<https://www.nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices/psychological-first-aid-and-skills-for-psychological-recovery/about-pfa>) (PFA), originally designed to help children, adolescents, adults, and families in the aftermath of a disaster or terrorism. It's now used to help people who have experienced any type of trauma. PFA is based on the idea that distress is normal after a traumatic event. Rather than treat that stress like a disorder, the focus of this approach is to provide support and assistance and share information about stress reactions and coping strategies. Mental health providers and disaster response workers provide PFA in the days and weeks after a trauma, in diverse settings including hospitals, housing shelters, community settings, and even over telephone crisis hotlines. The goal of PFA is to reduce distress and improve coping and functioning, both short-term and long-term.

Another evidence-based treatment is cognitive behavioral therapy (</ptsd-guideline/patients-and-families/cognitive-behavioral>), or CBT, which is used to treat many psychological disorders, including traumatic stress. CBT is a psychological treatment that helps people learn to change unhelpful thinking and behavioral patterns. The World Health Organization recommends trauma-focused CBT (<https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2013.166723>) to treat symptoms of acute traumatic stress in adults. Some research also suggests that people who receive trauma-focused CBT may be less likely to develop chronic PTSD (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2013.08.005>).

In addition, a variety of treatments have been developed to help children and adolescents who have been exposed to trauma (<https://www.nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices/trauma-treatments>) or adverse childhood events such as neglect or abuse. Many of these therapies are family-based and include the child's parents or caregivers in the treatment process.

If you or a loved one is struggling to recover from a traumatic event, therapy

can help.

---

Thanks to psychologists Soo Jeong Youn, PhD, and Raquel Halfond, PhD, who assisted with this article.

---

## References

- American Psychological Association. (2017). *PTSD treatment: Information for patients and families*.  
<https://www.apa.org/ptsd-guideline/patients-and-families>
- Kilpatrick, D. G., Resnick, H. S., Milanak, M. E., Miller, M. W., Keyes, K. M., & Friedman, M. J. (2013). National estimates of exposure to traumatic events and PTSD prevalence using DSM-IV and DSM-5 criteria. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 26*(5), 537–547. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.21848>
- Kliem, S., & Kröger, C. (2013). Prevention of chronic PTSD with early cognitive behavioral therapy. A meta-analysis using mixed-effects modeling. *Behaviour Research and Therapy, 51*(11), 753–761.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.brat.2013.08.005>
- National Center for PTSD. *Acute stress disorder*. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.  
[https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/related/acute\\_stress.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/related/acute_stress.asp)
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. *About Psychological First Aid*.  
<http://www.nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices/psychological-first-aid-and-skills-for-psychological-recovery/about-pfa>
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. *Trauma treatments*. <http://www.nctsn.org/treatments-and-practices/trauma-treatments>
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. *What is child traumatic stress?*  
[http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/what\\_is\\_child\\_traumatic\\_stress.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources/what_is_child_traumatic_stress.pdf)
- Tol, W. A., Barbui, C., & van Ommeren, M. (2013). Management of acute stress, PTSD, and bereavement: WHO recommendations. *JAMA: Journal of the American Medical Association, 310*(5), 477–478.  
<https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2013.166723>

---

### Find this article at:

<https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma/stress>