

Coping With Trauma

Taking Care of You

Although everyone experiences it differently, trauma can take a toll on our mental and physical health. Traumatic stress occurs when the body's stress response system becomes overwhelmed, causing the brain to remain on-alert and sending instructions to the body to fight, flee, or freeze, even after the threat has passed. This can cause headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, high blood pressure, and other physical symptoms which, if left untreated, can cause a myriad of serious health issues. Trauma can also cause anxiety, irritability, mood swings, helplessness, and hopelessness which can impact cognitive function, self-image, motivation, and relationships. And while all of these symptoms are normal responses to trauma, it is important to pay attention to them and do what is necessary to take care of you.

Strategies for Supporting Your Physical Health

Give Yourself a Break

Take time each day to pause and give yourself time to set aside the stress you may be feeling. Take a walk, read, listen to music or a podcast, soak in the tub, get a massage, journal, go for a run, or practice mindfulness or deep breathing. Give yourself permission to take care of you.

Get Plenty of Sleep

Even in the best of circumstances, a lack of sleep can cause irritability and fatigue. This is even more true, following a traumatic event. Give your body the rest it needs. Try relaxing for 10-15 minutes before going to bed. Turn off all electronics and listen to soothing music or a guided meditation to quiet your brain.

Exercise

Exercise reduces the adrenaline that causes the fight, flight, freeze response and releases endorphins that can help your brain reset and focus. For some people going for a long run or working out for hours in the gym relieves stress. But even 15 to 20 minutes of walking, yoga, tai chi, dancing, or any kind of movement can help the body release endorphins and help you to feel better.

Explore Nature

Being outside and experiencing the awe of nature can reduce stress. Even if rock climbing or whitewater rafting are out of your comfort zone, simply walking through a garden or park or enjoying a thunderstorm or a sunset may help produce those all-important endorphins for wellbeing.

Consider the Power of Touch

Touch plays an important role in the physical and emotional development of infants. Likewise, touch therapies including massage, reflexology, and chiropractic manipulation can be helpful in reducing cortisol levels and increasing the levels of dopamine, oxytocin, and serotonin in the body.

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Eat Healthy

Providing your body with proper nutrients is essential for maintaining physical health, especially following trauma. Having regular mealtimes; eating a balanced diet, including proteins and vegetables; and watching your sugar and salt intake all help to reduce the negative effects of stress on the body.

Drink Water

Drinking a glass of water can help you to feel calmer. Keeping your body hydrating is important for health. Even mild dehydration can cause confusion, moodiness, and fatigue. In addition to drinking plenty of water it is important to limit drinking sodas, energy drinks, coffee, and alcohol which can counter the benefits that water provides.

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Practice Mindfulness

An important strategy for coping with the stress from a traumatic event, is to reset your brain from crisis to calm. Focusing on the present moment can help your body and mind feel calm. A mindful practice may include deep breathing or focusing with intention on an object or a task using your senses. Listening to mindful music, tones, or meditations are also ways to practice mindfulness and calm your nervous system.

Connect with Others

Sometimes when we're feeling stress, it's tempting to isolate or withdraw from social interactions. While taking time to get away by yourself can help to refresh and gain focus, connecting with others who love and support you can also help you to feel better.

Have Fun!

Traumatic events cause stress, but after the initial crisis is over it's okay to take some time to laugh and have fun with family and / or friends. Fun and laughter can improve creativity, increase critical thinking, and promote optimism and a growth mindset.

Be Productive

Set a goal, even a small goal, and do it! Accomplishing a goal can build your self-esteem, increases your feelings of empowerment, and develops your executive functions, which in turn helps you to problem solve more easily.

Learn Something New

Taking time to learn something new not only builds cognitive skills, but it can also be relaxing and can increase self-confidence. Try playing a new game, learning to play an instrument, or picking up that hobby you've been wanting to try such as painting, gardening, cooking, or woodworking. Or take time to research a new topic of interest or improve your cultural competence by learning about another culture.

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Unplug

Especially during and following a traumatic event, getting the latest news developments may be important for your safety. But too much information can be confusing and exhausting and can exacerbate anxiety and stress. Turn off the TV and the notifications on your phone so that you can choose the amount of news and information that is helpful for you.

Process Your Emotions

While finding ways to relieve your stress is helpful, it is also important to listen to what your emotions are telling you. Emotions provide information. If you're feeling uncomfortable emotions, you may have problems to be solved and issues to be resolved or released. Writing is one helpful tool for processing your emotions. Consider writing poetry or songs or journaling. It's also important to try not to make any major life decisions immediately following a traumatic event. Take time to work through your emotions so that you can make the best decisions for yourself.

Seek Support

After allowing yourself some time and practicing self-care strategies, you may find that you're still feeling overwhelmed or not feeling like yourself. If you have any concerns, it may be helpful to talk with a trusted friend or family member or join a support group with others who have experienced a similar trauma. It can also help to talk with a mental health professional such as a counselor, therapist, or psychologist. In addition, there are many agencies online that provide help for coping with trauma.

SAMHSA

Helpline: 800-985-5990

Website: samhsa.gov

National Suicide Prevention

Lifeline: 800-273-TALK (8255) 888-628-9454 (Spanish)
800-799-4889 (TTY)

Website: suicidepreventionlifeline.org