



# Trauma

## How can I tell if I am traumatised?

Trauma is the emotional, psychological, physical or psyche response to an extreme event. While trauma is a normal reaction to a horrible event, the effects can be severe and interfere with our ability to live a healthy life. These events may have very little impact on one person but can lead to significant distress in another. The potential impact may be related to resilience factor like suddenness of the event, mental and physical health, presence of coping skills, past or present life stressors, personality types and availability of social and emotional support at the time and after the event.

MRI and CT scans of the brain are able to observe the brain and reveal that trauma changes both the structure and the function of the brain.

## Common traumatic events (that may be reoccurring)

- Natural disasters such as fires, earthquakes, tornados or hurricanes.
- Interpersonal violence like rape, child abuse, domestic violence.
- Suicide of a loved one or witnessing an act of violence.
- Accidents, falls or injury.
- Acts of violence such as an armed robbery, war, or terrorism
- Relationship break ups or divorce.
- Surgery
- Death of a loved one
- Diagnosis of a life threatening or disabling condition

## Signs and Symptoms of Trauma

### Cognitive:

- Intrusive thoughts of the event that may occur out of the blue
- Nightmares
- Visual images of the event
- Recurrent memories and suicidal or painful thoughts
- Poor concentration & loss of memory
- Disorientation or confusion
- Mood swings

### Behavioural:

- Avoidance of activities or places that trigger memories of the event
- Social isolation and withdrawal
- Lack of interest in previously enjoyable activities
- High terror alert -  
e.g a car backfiring, seeing someone in uniformed, a room without windows
- Unpredictable emotions
- Strained relationships

### Physical:

- Easily startled or edginess
- Headaches



- Nausea
- Tremendous fatigue and exhaustion
- Tachycardia - irregular heart rate
- Sexual dysfunction
- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Faintness, dizziness or weakness
- Aches and pains throughout the body
- Extreme alertness; looking out for warnings of potential danger

#### Psychological:

- Overwhelming fear
- Frequent sadness, crying, depression, feeling bad
- Obsessive and compulsive behaviours
- Detachment from other people and emotions
- Emotional numbing
- Guilt & shame- especially if one lived while others perished
- Disbelief, emotional shock
- Irritability, anger
- Anxiety or panic attacks
- Feeling fearful, nervous or restless

#### Effects of Untreated Psychological Trauma

- Substance abuse especially alcoholism
- 25% of people experiencing trauma before 16yrs become addicted to drugs
- Sexual problems
- Inability to maintain & choose appropriately for healthy relationships
- Hostility
- Constant arguments with loved ones
- Social withdrawal
- Constant feelings of being threatened
- Self-destructive or impulsive behaviours
- Uncontrollable reactive thoughts
- Difficulty making healthy work or lifestyle choices
- Dissociation
- Feelings of depression, shame, hopelessness, despair, ineffectiveness
- Feeling as though one is permanently damaged
- Loss of former belief systems - lost faith
- Compulsive behaviours

#### Treatments

Everyone will respond to a potential traumatic event differently, some people will have very few affects and others may suffer immediate side effects. Still others may not show signs of stress until sometime after the event and this may be years. Understanding the emotions and normal responses that follow a traumatic event can help cope with feelings, thoughts and behaviours. This can involve counselling, group processing, hypnosis, writing, drawing, meditation, physical activity eg. dance, exercise, yoga or any other forms of express that is useful.