

Trauma
and Relationships



After experiencing traumatic situations, many people find their relationships with others are affected. It is common for the overwhelming circumstances of traumatic events to influence one's interactions with friends, family, coworkers, and others. While these reactions are unique to each person and are related to their particular experience of trauma, most people share some typical responses to what has happened to them. Traumatic events deeply challenge people's sense of safety and security in the world. Their confidence in the future may be shaken, the way they understand the meaning of life may be changed, and the way they think and feel about themselves may be different. Relationships can reflect these feelings in a variety of ways.



The range of traumatic experiences affecting relationships

No matter what traumatic event or circumstance a person endures, whether it is the sudden death of a loved one, an aviation disaster, a hate crime, community violence, childhood abuse, sexual assault, war, or refugee circumstances, it is natural for the experience to affect relationships with others. This includes events that occur once or continue over time, those that are caused naturally or intentionally, and those that affect a person together with others in their community or individually. Regardless of the distinct nature of each of these experiences, the disruption to people's lives from traumatic events may also cause disruptions in their feelings for and connections to others.

How trauma affects relationships

Living through traumatic events may result in expectations of danger, betrayal, or potential harm within new or old relationships. Survivors may feel vulnerable and confused about what is safe, and therefore it may be difficult to trust others, even those whom they trusted in the past. It may feel frightening to get close to people for fear of being hurt in an unsafe world. Or people may feel angry at their helplessness and the loss of control in their lives, and become aggressive or try to control others. Anger and aggression may also arise because, after traumatic experiences, a person may feel threatened very easily. This defensive aggression is a natural reaction for a person who feels threatened.

An individual's sense of who he or she is may also be affected. Trauma survivors may feel intense shame, unlovable or bad in some way, or guilty about what happened to them or about something that they did or feel that they should have done in the traumatic situation. A person may feel that no one can truly understand what has occurred, or may worry that it is a burden to discuss these experiences within a close relationship. For some it becomes natural to isolate from others, withdrawing from friends, family, coworkers, and life, feeling distant, disconnected, or detached. Others may become anxious or frightened in relation to others, experience them as having power or control, or easily feel abandoned or rejected. Still others may become overprotective or dependent. Many trauma survivors feel emotionally numb and have trouble feeling or expressing positive emotions in a relationship. Also, physical intimacy may be more difficult and some survivors of traumatic experiences may find it difficult or impossible to have a fulfilling sexual relationship. Some people experience many of these feelings, which can be confusing or frightening.

When trauma occurs within relationships

If trauma has occurred within a relationship, for instance if an intimate partner abuses an adult, it can be particularly difficult to relate comfortably in close relationships. In these circumstances, trust has been betrayed, an intimate connection has been lost, and an expected support system is instead dangerous. A fear that others are not trustworthy and an inability to find safety may result. Developing closeness may be confusing, frightening, tentative, or avoided entirely. Tenderness, sexuality, and physical closeness may be affected.

When traumatic experiences occur early in childhood, for instance when a child is sexually abused by a trusted family member, the most basic aspects of trust and safety within a primary relationship are undermined. The disrupted earliest attachments affect that person's ability to feel calm and to expect caring, responsive, comforting connections in adult life. Memories and feelings of betrayal, loss, shame, secrecy, violation, and threats to bodily integrity may surface or become part of later relationships. For some people, after childhood abuse or neglect, their relationships may express the struggle to develop basic trust and create safe attachments.

How long are relationships affected after traumatic experiences?

The range of reactions affecting relationships after traumatic experiences varies over time. The impact may last several weeks or months for some people, as they gradually return to earlier ways of relating, and find their relationships can be supportive and safe. For others, it may take a longer time before they become more comfortable approaching and sustaining their relationships safely. And some people may find their relationships are deeply affected; they may be unable to relate comfortably with others or to establish or reestablish connections with them. Many reasons exist for this, including the experience of traumatic events, the existence of previous trauma, current life circumstances, and coping styles of dealing with significant stress and loss.



Treatment can help

Treatment is available to respond to these difficult experiences, minimize isolation, and restore a sense of hope. It can be helpful to discuss traumatic experiences, feelings of grief, and relationship difficulties with a professional who is familiar with the complex effects of trauma. A therapist can offer a safe relationship for building trust and a sense of security. The opportunity within that relationship to establish meaning, purpose, and hope can be a first step in developing or reestablishing relationships with others and with oneself, building a social network of support, and engaging more fully with life.

How to find help

A family doctor, clergy person, health clinic, local mental health association, state psychiatric, psychological, or social work association, or health insurer may be helpful in providing a referral to a counselor or therapist with experience treating people affected by trauma. For more information about trauma or the International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies, call 1-877-469-PTSD (7873).

What is ISTSS ?

The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies is a nonprofit organization whose goal is to ensure that everyone affected by trauma receives the best possible professional response, and to reduce traumatic stressors and their immediate and long-term consequences worldwide.

ISTSS provides an independent community for supporting and sharing research, clinical strategies, public policy concerns and theoretical formulations on trauma. ISTSS members include psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, nurses, counselors, researchers, journalists, clergy, law enforcement, correctional facilities administrators, advocates and others with an interest in the treatment and study of traumatic stress.

Members work in clinical and nonclinical settings around the world, including public and private health facilities, private practice, universities and research foundations.

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