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**Coping With Trauma**

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**\*\*Warning: This article discusses trauma and may be triggering to some readers.\*\***

Sometimes when trauma occurs there are more than just physical wounds. Mental and emotional wounds are common, especially if the trauma is life threatening. There are all sorts of traumas that might cause such a wound: physical violence, a car accident, combat, natural disasters, health problems, the loss of a loved one, abuse. The list goes on. While many people have difficulty adjusting after such an event, given time most do recover from their physical and mental wounds. Some, however, continue to struggle for months, or much longer, with what is known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Sometimes a person endures sustained trauma for a period of time and can develop Complex-PTSD. Both involve significant life impairment due to trauma.

Reactions to trauma vary, but there are four basic responses: intrusive memories, avoidance, negative changes in thinking and mood, and changes in physical and emotional reactions. Many of these are reactions to what are known as “triggers,” things that for one reason or another remind the individual of the event(s).

**What can you do if you are suffering the aftereffects of trauma?**

*Remember the basics.* It’s very easy to forget the basics (such as showers, eating regularly, and brushing teeth) as you do your best to cope with the after-effects of trauma. They may be challenging. Be kind to yourself. If getting up out of bed and showering is the limit of what you are able to manage, that is all right. Try to keep up with those things. With time and support you may be able to practice some more extensive self-care.

*Do your best to practice self-care.* Self-care is anything that improves your mental, emotional, or physical health; it is the way we help ourselves manage stress. What qualifies as self-care for you might not help someone else. Try to find what helps you. Some examples of self-care include: exercising, music, prayer, and meditation. Sometimes self-care looks like a cozy nook and a book or dinner with friends. Whatever it is that feeds your soul, try to do more of those things. If these things are challenging to manage right now, ask for help, or know that they may be within your ability sooner than you realize.

*Find additional coping mechanisms that work for you.* There are generally two types of coping mechanisms: active and avoidant. Overall, avoidant coping mechanisms are not particularly healthy (i.e. substance abuse in order to avoid unpleasant emotions or intrusive memories of the trauma). On the other hand, active coping mechanisms are usually pro-active, healthy ways to deal with post-trauma experiences. Examples include problem-solving and identifying your triggers. This helps pro-actively reclaim personal power over an (often) overwhelming post-trauma reality. If there is something specific that is triggering, what can you do to make the situation a bit more in your control? For example, if noisy crowds are a trigger for you, carry a pair of ear plugs in your pocket or purse in case you need them. If there are stressors that cannot be controlled, such as physical ailments, consider active coping mechanisms that are internal, such as meditation, positive self-talk, or talking about your difficulties with others.

*Stay connected to your support network.* Individuals who suffer trauma often pull back from life and loved ones in an effort to feel safe and in-control in an unpredictable world. Remember: your support network wants to help you, but they may not know how. Advocate for yourself if you can. If you can’t, ask someone else, such as a trusted parent, teacher, minister, advocate, or friend, to do so for you.

*Seek out resources.* There is a lot of literature out there for all sorts of traumas. There might be something that you can read that might help you. Try *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk. Some people find talking with a professional extremely helpful, especially in the case of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, where medication may be needed. Resources can help you remember that you are not alone, you will get through this, and you have options.

**How do you support someone suffering the after effects of trauma?**

*Be aware and respectful of triggers when possible.* Ask the individual ahead of time what to do if they have a reaction to a trigger. Try to plan accordingly (i.e. if being in crowded areas really triggers someone you know, plan outings with that person where there are not as many people unless you discuss it first). Be open to the possibility that the person you want to support may be overwhelmed by talking about stressors, or may not know all of their triggers yet. It may be too soon for them. It is okay for you and for them to not have the answers right away. In this case, pay attention and follow their lead.

*Refrain from judgments.* It’s often natural to offer platitudes (i.e., it’s what God intended, this is the path you’ve been given, everything will turn out all right in the end) but these sorts of responses fail to acknowledge the person's pain and loss and can be very hurtful. Oftentimes attentively listening without comment is the best medicine you can offer someone. Affirming phrases such as, “I’m so sorry that happened. You are not alone. If you need anything I’m here for you,” give support and leave an open ended opportunity for the individual to respond. The person may be ready to talk about their experience, or they may not be. Either way remember, it is up to them what their path to recovery looks like.

*Remember to support yourself as well.* In an earnest attempt to support your loved one, don't forget that people who are directly affected by trauma aren't the only ones who need support; the people who love them often do, too. It is scary to have a loved one live through a dangerous situation or suffer trauma. The difference in perspective can create conflict if there is not enough understanding or outlet, which is the last thing either of you need. In addition, empathizing deeply with the person you are supporting can encourage what is known as "secondary trauma." Reaching out to your own support network, and potentially even seeking support from a mental health professional yourself, is a good way to make sure you are both supported and that you can continue to support your loved one sustainably, without burnout.

**Everyone needs help sometimes and everyone can offer help sometimes.**

Remember, we are all a community. Many of us care about you and want to support you through your time of need. If you need help, reach out. It can be hard to ask for help but sometimes things can’t get better without support. If someone asks you for support, or if you see someone who needs support, know that it may feel awkward, you might not know what to say or do, but being there for someone and just showing you care can make a big difference.

Together we can lift each other up through the darkest of times and that is what being a community is all about.