

# Dr. Wood On Trauma

A traumatic event is an event in which a person experiences or witnesses a stressful event involving death, serious injury or the threat of these to oneself or others leaving the person feeling intense fear, horror, or powerlessness. There are a wide variety of situations that might be considered traumatic, ranging from physical or sexual abuse to combat experiences to being bullied to trying to help someone who has been in a car accident. There are many, many other situations that could also be considered a traumatic event. These events happen every day around the world and although trauma affects people in different ways, there are some common reactions that you may experience. These post-trauma signs and symptoms may begin immediately, or might happen after a few days or weeks. It is important to remember that these reactions are normal. Although it might feel abnormal, the following reactions are actually normal reactions to abnormal events.

## Common Reactions to Trauma

- Feeling fear or anxiety about things that you never thought about before the event occurred.
- Being easily startled and having emotional outbursts. In a heightened state of awareness, this reaction is understandable. When you find yourself in this type of situation, taking slow, deep breaths can help to calm you.
- Being very aware or “hypervigilant” of things around you. This often accompanies a feeling of being vulnerable or unsafe. When having these types of feelings, it is important to keep a healthy perspective between what you feel and what you know to be true.
- Experiencing a change in sleep or eating patterns. Disturbances in sleep are quite common. You may have bad dreams or nightmares, sometimes about the traumatic event or you may find it hard to get to sleep or stay asleep. You may also experience loss of appetite, a craving for “comfort” foods, or digestive problems like nausea, diarrhea, or constipation.
- Becoming easily distracted. A negative form of distraction is resorting to numbing behaviors such as drinking or drug use. You may be trying to remove yourself from the situation so that you don’t have to think about it. There are, however, ways to distract yourself in a positive fashion. Try watching a movie, listening to music, reading a book or going out to dinner with friends to get your mind off things for a while.
- Having flashbacks or unwanted memories of disturbing images or perceptions associated with the trauma. Again, this is a normal reaction.
- Experiencing mood shifts and intense emotions. It is important to try to understand what you are feeling so that you can be aware of how it may be influencing your thoughts and actions. Writing down your feelings in a journal can be a good way to look for any patterns and to track whether your feelings are becoming more manageable or not.

### **What Causes These Reactions?**

They are a sign that the body and mind are actively trying to cope with the traumatic experience and at some level, trying to protect you from the danger that was posed by the traumatic event. The brain learns in one episode that the events it experienced are dangerous and it is trying to ensure that you are safe from that danger as you move forward. Even if you are not actively trying to think about the traumatic event, there is often a part of the brain that stays on the lookout for that particular danger (even if you know consciously that you are not currently in danger). These responses may not seem logical or expected or wanted, however, these symptoms are responses that many people have.

### **How Long Do These Symptoms Last?**

The short answer is...it depends. Sometimes these symptoms fade in a short period of time and sometimes symptoms related to trauma can be difficult work through and can interfere with one's relationships, one's work or other areas that impact a person's ability to have a happy and fulfilling life. Traumatic events can sometimes stick with people for years or decades and can have a negative impact on a daily basis. If you are struggling with symptoms related to new or old traumatic experiences, it can be important to seek professional treatment - both for yourself and for those who care about you.

If you have questions about trauma and the related symptoms or questions about treatment options for symptoms related to trauma, please call Dr. Wood at 817-694-8916.