

# Helping Domestic Violence Survivors Cope with a Traumatic Event<sup>1</sup>

## What is a Traumatic Event?

An event, or series of events, that causes moderate to severe stress reactions, is called a traumatic event. Traumatic events are characterized by a sense of horror, helplessness, serious injury, or the threat of serious injury or death. Traumatic events affect survivors, rescue workers, and friends and relatives of victims who have been directly involved. In addition to potentially affecting those who suffer injuries or loss. Most people report feeling better within three months after a traumatic event.

## Common Responses to a Traumatic Event

Cognitive	Emotional	Physical	Behavioral
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• poor concentration</li> <li>• confusion</li> <li>• disorientation</li> <li>• indecisiveness</li> <li>• shortened attention span</li> <li>• memory loss</li> <li>• unwanted memories</li> <li>• difficulty making decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• shock</li> <li>• numbness</li> <li>• feeling overwhelmed</li> <li>• depression</li> <li>• feeling lost</li> <li>• fear of harm to self and/or loved ones</li> <li>• feeling nothing</li> <li>• feeling abandoned</li> <li>• uncertainty of feelings</li> <li>• volatile emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• nausea</li> <li>• lightheadedness</li> <li>• dizziness</li> <li>• gastro-intestinal problems</li> <li>• rapid heart rate</li> <li>• tremors</li> <li>• headaches</li> <li>• grinding of teeth</li> <li>• fatigue</li> <li>• poor sleep</li> <li>• pain</li> <li>• hyperarousal</li> <li>• jumpiness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• suspicion</li> <li>• irritability</li> <li>• arguments with friends and loved ones</li> <li>• withdrawal</li> <li>• excessive silence</li> <li>• inappropriate humor</li> <li>• increased/decreased eating</li> <li>• change in sexual desire or functioning</li> <li>• increased smoking</li> <li>• increased substance use or abuse</li> </ul>

## How Do You Interact with DV Survivors after a Traumatic Event?

The worker should be alert to the various needs of the traumatized person.

- Listen and encourage the client to talk about their reactions when they feel ready.
- Validate the emotional reactions of the person. Intense, painful reactions are common responses to a traumatic event.
- De-emphasize agency jargon.
- Communicate, person to person rather than “expert” to “victim,” using straightforward terms.

## What Can You Do to Help Clients Cope with a Traumatic Event?

Explain their reactions may be normal, especially right after the traumatic event, and then encourage your client to:

- Not blame themselves.
- Identify concrete needs and attempt to help. Traumatized persons are often preoccupied with concrete needs.
- Identify sources of support including family and friends. Encourage talking about their experiences and feelings with supportive friends, family or other support networks (e.g. domestic violence service providers, counselors, clergy)
- Learn to recognize early warning signs for physical abuse such as a partner's extreme jealousy, controlling behavior, verbal threats, history of violent tendencies or abusing others, and verbal or emotional abuse.

### **Who is at Risk for Severe and Longer Lasting Reactions to Trauma?**

Some people are at greater risk than others for developing sustained and long-term reactions to a traumatic event including disorders such as a post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and generalized anxiety. Factors that contribute to the risk of long-term impairment such as PTSD are listed.

- Proximity to the event. Closer exposure to actual event leads to greater risk.
- Multiple stressors. More stress or an accumulation of stressors may create more difficulty.
- History of trauma.
- Meaning of the event in relationship to past stressors. A traumatic event may activate unresolved fears or frightening memories.
- Persons with chronic medical illness or psychological disorders.

### **What Can You Do to Support Survivors in Response to a Traumatic Event?**

Helping survivors of traumatic events and their family members requires preparation, sensitivity, assertiveness, flexibility and common sense.

- Refer survivors to the domestic violence or sexual assault service provider in your area.
- Refer survivors to mental health professional who have experience treating the needs of survivors of traumatic events.
- Learn to identify symptoms of anxiety, depression, and PTSD.
- Know what services are available for victims and perpetrators of domestic violence in your community.
- Learn more about domestic violence. The more you know about domestic violence, the easier it will be to recognize it and help clients who may be victims or perpetrators.

1. Adapted from CDC Fact Sheets - *Helping Patients Cope With A Traumatic Event; Intimate Partner Violence: Prevention Tips and Resources; Coping with a Traumatic Event* (Public)

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