

Trauma and Crime

Client Handbook Series
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& Ontario Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services
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What is trauma & what happens to you immediately

A traumatic event is anything that happens which threatens the safety and security of a person. They are events that are unusual, and often outside the normal range of people's experiences. Some examples of these events include witnessing or experiencing abuse, physical or sexual violence, or even threats of violence. Trauma is the emotional and physical reaction of people to a traumatic event. These reactions are specific to an individual; different people can have different reactions to the same experience. There is not correct reaction.

Common Responses Immediately Following Traumatic Events

- **Feeling shock or numbness**
 - Sense of numbness or being dazed both in thinking and action
 - Feeling disconnected from others
 - Muffled hearing, headaches, nausea, muscle aches or shaking
- **Feeling frightened**
 - Scared, wondering if it will re-occur
- **Feeling ashamed or embarrassed it happened**
 - Withdraw from others, staying alone
- **Denial**
 - Disbelief that it happened
 - Trying to act as if it didn't happen

Which of these have you experienced in the past?

- Feeling shock or numbness
- Feeling frightened
- Feeling ashamed or embarrassed it happened/withdrawal from others
- Denial/disbelief

How have you dealt with these symptoms?

- More social withdrawal
 - Substance use
 - Exercise
 - Anger
 - Self-harm
 - Other
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What happens to you over time?

Everyone is at risk of experiencing traumatic events and anyone can be overwhelmed by trauma. Fortunately, people can limit the impact of trauma in terms of psychological and physical concerns. Also, over time people do recover from their trauma. Still, there are numerous common signs that someone has been negatively affected by the experience.

Common Responses Over Time to Traumatic Events

- **Feeling negative emotions**
 - Sense of increased anxiety, depression.
 - A feeling of guilt.
 - More acute symptoms are nightmares, concentration and memory problems, and changes in sexual activity.
 - Irritability or anger leading to more frequent conflict with others
 - Numbness, or a lack of feeling.
 - Other signs of negative emotions include restlessness, feeling down, a lack of energy, sleep and appetite problems, reluctance to trust others, and quick to anger and blame others.
- **Common problematic coping methods**
 - Substance misuse to try and feel better, or self-medication.
 - Avoid and isolate oneself from others because you feel they don't understand or cannot be trusted. This can also include excessive work.
 - Always being on guard.
 - Avoiding places or doing things that remind you of the event
 - Allowing anger to become violence.

Possible triggers

Sometimes people get stuck with trauma response symptoms even after the trauma is long gone. These responses can be re-started or made worse – that is, ‘triggered’ by things that act as reminders of the traumatic event. At times, the result of these triggers is that it feels like you relive the event, or that it is harder to get the event out of your head.

Common triggers that might increase symptoms

- **Sights, sounds and smells similar to the traumatic event**
- **Feeling a loss of private space**
- **Certain times of day**
- **Proximity to certain individuals (not just the perpetrator(s))**
- **Anniversary dates**

What are your triggers?

Specific sights, sounds and smells

Feeling closed in

Specific times/dates

Anniversary dates

Specific people

Other

Who is at risk?

Everyone is at some risk for experiencing trauma, however some people are more at risk than others. There are some things in people's lives which make experiencing traumatic events more likely. There are also things which make it more likely that experiencing adverse events will result in trauma. These things are known as risk factors. As is clear from this list of risk factors, many people involved in the criminal justice system are at increased risk of both having experienced and suffering from traumatic events.

Common Risk Factors

- **High levels of family disharmony & chaotic home situation**
- **Presence of domestic violence**
- **Physical, sexual or emotional abuse**
- **Neglectful or inconsistent parenting**
- **Absence of a stable and supportive person in one's life**
- **Separation or divorce**
- **Substance misuse**
- **Mental health concerns**
- **Education and employment challenges and poor performance**
- **Criminal peers**
- **Antisocial behaviour**
- **Experiencing multiple traumatic events**

The importance of resilience

As mentioned before, everyone is at some risk of experiencing traumatic events. Resilience reduces the impact of traumatic events. Resilience is the process of adapting of coping effectively in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress — such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems or workplace and financial stressors. It means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences. What is important to remember is that resilience is something that you can learn and develop.

Factors Associated With Resilience

- **The capacity to make realistic plans and take steps to carry them out.**
- **A positive view of yourself and confidence in your strengths and abilities.**
- **Skills in communication and problem solving.**
- **The capacity to manage strong feelings and impulses.**

What has helped for you?

Below are some things that have helped others to cope with trauma. Number them in the order that they have been helpful for you. If you have not tried one of these yet, give it the rank you think it will deserve.

- Making plans for the future.**
- Having good friends.**
- Having a positive view and belief you can succeed.**
- Being able to talk to others.**
- Better anger control.**
- Better self-control.**
- Better problem solving.**
- Other.**

Coping with trauma symptoms

If you have developed some problems because of trauma, there are some things that have proven helpful for most people following traumatic events. These are not foolproof and may require practice. However, doing these on a regular basis will increase your chance of success.

Coping Methods

- **Find a creative outlet or hobby.**
- **Exercise regularly, eat well, and try to get enough sleep.**
- **Write, keep a journal.**
- **Keep a routine.**
- **Try to accomplish something, no matter how small, each day.**
- **Try relaxation training.**
- **Learn something new.**
- **Have some fun.**
- **Listen to favourite music, watch favourite TV show.**

Coping with your trauma symptoms

Here are some examples of how to apply these approaches.

Approach	Inside jail	On the street
Get creative	Draw, colour, do puzzles	Find a hobby, make crafts, draw, do puzzles
Exercise	Go to yard, do exercises on the range	Join a gym, get an exercise partner, try jogging/weightlifting
Eat well	Eat all your meals	Try not to always eat takeout, menu plan
Sleep well	Don't sleep all day, take medication if prescribed	Stay active, avoid alcohol and caffeine late in the day
Keep a journal	Keep track of daily mood – note what triggered certain moods, and your reactions to different situations	Keep track of daily/weekly appointments, keep a journal
Keep a routine	Try to do the same thing each day	Plan your days
Set goals	Set a goal for each day (read a chapter, write something for your lawyer, exercise)	Set daily/weekly goals in terms of family, work, friends, sobriety
Learn something new	Talk to others who can teach you a new skill – enroll in school, take programs	Go to the library, gym, school
Do something fun	Watch TV, play cards, call someone	Connect with others, join a church, try AA or NA
Distract yourself	Read a book, watch TV, play cards, do programming or school work	Go to a movie, listen to the radio, watch a favourite TV show

Which have you tried that helped you?

Coping

- Try to find a creative outlet or hobby.
- Exercise regularly, eat well, and try to get enough sleep.
- Write, keep a journal.
- Keep a routine.
- Try to accomplish something, no matter how small, each day (set goals).
- Try relaxation training.
- Learn something new.
- Have some fun, laugh.
- Listen to favourite music, watch favourite TV show.

Improving resilience

Resilience is not necessarily something that everyone has. Fortunately, there are things you can do to improve your resilience and limit the impact of trauma symptoms.

Improving Resilience

- **Make connections, having a support group.**
 - Accepting help strengthens resilience.
- **Avoid seeing crises as problems you can't deal with.**
 - Try not to over-react to difficult situations.
- **Accept that change is a part of living.**
 - Focus mainly on things you can control.
- **Move toward your goals**
 - Set realistic and obtainable goals, and make a plan to achieve them.
- **Nurture a positive view of yourself.**
 - Try to develop confidence in yourself. Remember your successes, everyone has had some
- **Maintain a hopeful outlook.**
 - Optimism means visualizing what you want rather than worrying about what your fear.
- **Keep things in perspective.**
 - Avoid blowing things out of proportion. If the worst that can happen is ridiculous, focus on how silly it is so you don't worry so much.
- **Take care of yourself.**
 - Exercise, watch your diet, do something you enjoy and find relaxing.

What NOT to do!

- **Don't bottle up your feelings**
Strong feelings are natural. While acting out in a violent or angry way is not helpful, you can still express your feelings safely. First, don't feel embarrassed about them. Bottling them up can make you feel worse and can damage your health. Let yourself talk about what has happened and how you feel, and don't worry if you cry.
- **Don't take on too much**
Being active can take your mind off what has happened, but you need time to think to go over what happened so you can come to terms with it. Take some time to get to a healthy routine.
- **Don't drink or use drugs**
Alcohol or drugs can blot out painful memories for a while, but they will stop you from coming to terms with what has happened. They can also cause depression and other health problems.
- **Don't make any major life changes**
Try to put off any big decisions. Your judgment may not be at its best and you may make choices you later regret. Take advice from people you trust.

Does Trauma Cause Crime?

No, experiencing a traumatic event does not cause criminal activity. Criminal activity most commonly comes from criminal thinking and poor decision-making. However, many individuals involved in the criminal justice system have experienced trauma. At times, decisions made about how to cope with the trauma have led to criminal activity.

How are crime and trauma related?

- **Risk factors for trauma also increase the opportunities and likelihood for criminal activity**
- **Common problematic ways of dealing with trauma symptoms include substance misuse and avoidance of others**
 - Substance abuse reduces self-control, leading to poor problem solving.
 - Withdrawal, anger and substance abuse all make employment more difficult (finding or keeping a job) and increases financial problems, which may lead to crime.
 - Substance abuse may keep you involved with criminal activity because you need crime to get drugs/alcohol.
 - Avoidance of others may lead to staying away from people due to guilt or anger. Substance abuse may also keep you from others, especially family and children, because you know they won't want to see you when you are high.
 - Avoidance of others means you have fewer ways of dealing with trauma, anger, depression or other strong feelings and therefore might end up acting in criminal ways
 - Substance abuse may keep you involved with others who want you to continue using so they can take advantage of you and your addiction.

When to get professional help

Most of the materials in the workbook are intended as self-help information. Sometimes, however, the symptoms are so severe that seeking professional help is recommended.

Signs You Should Seek Help

- **You have become increasingly suspicious of others, meaning you will not share information or believe they can be trusted. Often this means obsessing about feeling you are being screwed by others.**
- **You can't manage your emotions any time you think about the traumatic event, and you can't stop thinking about the traumatic event.**
- **Feeling as if you are reliving the traumatic event (nightmares, panic attacks, memories you can't get away from, even full reliving the experience with sights, sounds and smells).**
- **Sometimes feel disconnected from yourself, like you are outside yourself watching what is happening.**
- **Sometimes feeling that you hear voices inside your head telling you what to do.**

Aftercare

When symptoms are severe and/or persist over a period of time, seeing a physician or mental health professional is advisable.

Aftercare

- **Seeing a doctor to determine if medication may help, or a referral to therapy.**
- **Working on resilience approaches. Review and practice the ideas in this booklet and add your own.**
- **Developing a support system, including addictions and mental health workers.**
- **Expect progress to be gradual, not immediate. It will take time.**
- **Expect relapses, but don't overreact (seek alcohol or drugs).**
- **Make a list of resources for yourself – people and agencies that can help you. These include supportive friends or family, doctor, local addictions and mental health agency, and emergency help lines**

Summary

Here's a quick summary of what you have learned about trauma:

- 1) Traumatic events can happen to anyone.
- 2) Not all traumatic events result in trauma over the long term.
- 3) Some people are more at risk for experiencing trauma.
- 4) Triggers make symptoms feel worse.
- 5) There are things you can do to cope better with any trauma symptoms.
- 6) Trauma and experiencing traumatic events does not cause crime, however there is a link between trauma and crime. The link is that some ways of coping with trauma can lead to criminal activity.
- 7) Some people will benefit from professional help.
- 8) With or without professional help, there are things everyone can do to help reduce the effects of trauma.