

# Trauma and You

## What is Trauma?

People who become victims of a stressful or life-threatening event or accident often experience the event as an emotional shock. Examples of traumatic events include being a victim of a crime, experiencing domestic violence or sexual assault, being abused as a child, surviving a natural disaster, or the death of a loved one. These events are beyond a person's control, and can happen to anyone.

The hallmark of a traumatic experience is that it typically overwhelms an individual emotionally, mentally, and physically. These events can cause feelings of terror, intense fear, horror, helplessness,

*Trauma responses are NORMAL responses to ABNORMAL situations.*

and physical stress reactions. The ways in which we cope with stressful events are ineffective in the face of traumatic experiences.

The impact of these events does not simply go away when the event is over. Traumatic experiences are profound and sometimes can change the way in which people see themselves and

the world. Traumatic events can often produce lasting changes in your emotions, your thoughts, and your body's stress response and how you body feels.

This handout provides information on common reactions to trauma, focusing on the trauma of domestic violence. We hope it will assist you in understanding the way in which your experiences have impacted you, and knowing that these reactions are normal, valid responses. We wish you the best as you move on your journey towards regaining a sense of safety and control over your life and work on healing and moving forward.

## Domestic Violence and Trauma

When we experience trauma at the hands of someone we love and trust, it often impacts us profoundly and in many areas of our lives. Domestic violence involves a pattern of coercive and controlling behavior that your partner uses against you to obtain power and control over you and your life. By

using such tactics as intimidation, coercion and threats, economic abuse, emotional abuse, and using your children, your partner's actions might make you feel fearful, powerless, and hopeless, as you struggle to stay as safe as you can in a dangerous situation. Even if you decide to leave the

relationship, your partner might still pose a significant risk to your emotional and physical safety, which often means that healing from abusive experiences takes additional time and effort. Yet many victims of domestic violence do heal, and go on to live fulfilling and enriching lives. You can too.



## Trauma symptoms:

- *Feelings of fear*
- *Feeling like you have lost control*
- *Having trouble concentrating*
- *Feeling guilty*
- *Feeling negative about yourself*
- *Depression*
- *Anxiety*
- *Problems in your relationships*



For more information, contact your local domestic violence program or ODVN at 800-934-9840 or [www.odvn.org](http://www.odvn.org)

# How Do People React to Trauma?

There are three common “clusters” of the body and brain’s response to trauma. They include:

**Hyperarousal:** This refers to the physiological (body) changes that occur in the brains and bodies of trauma survivors, which prepare them to respond to perceived danger. You might feel like you are constantly on the alert for danger, startle easily, and feel like you are “on” all the time. These physical

responses can occur weeks, months or years after the event, when a person is reminded of the trauma.

**Intrusion or re-experiencing events:** These symptoms refer to the experience of the trauma “intruding” upon your life after a traumatic event is over. This involves having memories of a disturbing event when you don’t want to or weren’t even thinking about it. This often makes people feel that they aren’t in control.

**Constriction or avoidance reactions:** Often our brain responds to stress by trying to keep us safe through ignoring or avoiding anything related to the trauma. This can include “numbing” of feelings and thoughts connected with the traumatic situation. You might feel the urge to avoid all circumstances associated with the trauma and may withdraw from others as a way of seeking emotional safety.

# How Can Trauma Impact Me?

Each person is impacted differently by their experiences with trauma. We do know that trauma can have a huge impact on many areas of your life. Trauma often impacts a person’s ability to control their emotions, make themselves feel better, make decisions, and develop plans. It is very

common for victims of domestic violence to feel like their relationship has changed their lives in multiple ways they would have never imagined. Survivors often talk about the ways in which abuse has affected their physical health, mental health, emotional health, feelings about themselves and

others, their relationships with loved ones and other people, their spiritual relationships, and their understanding of the world. Trauma often changes people, but we know that survivors of trauma are strong. We know that recovering and healing from traumatic experiences is possible and happens often.

# What Can Help Me Heal?

**Give yourself some time:** It can take time to recover from traumatic events, but understanding it takes time to heal and process things does seem to help almost everyone. It helps to get some sleep and make sure you are eating and attending to your body’s needs.

**Talk about your traumatic experiences:** Telling your story to those who care about you is essential to healing. Breaking the silence about your experiences can be an important means of coping, and will help you process what happened to you.

**Re-establish a sense of safety:** Feeling safe is the first step in healing from trauma. Often this begins with regaining a feeling of control over your body. Pay attention to your body’s reactions and think about how you calm down when you are stressed.