

Facing a Trauma

Objective

To identify how avoiding things related to a trauma has affected your life and to develop ways to seek help in facing your distressing thoughts and feelings.

You Should Know

Did you know that approximately 61 percent of men and 51 percent of women have experienced at least one traumatic event in their lifetime, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs? There are many different kinds of trauma and no two people will react in exactly the same way to a given trauma. Accidents, death, war, loss, sexual assault, and other violent acts are easily seen as major traumas; but many people can experience ongoing distress related to less “obvious” traumas, including neglect, divorce, emotional abandonment, verbal abuse, chronic criticism, job loss, and so on, whose impact tends to be minimized in our culture.

Memories and feelings associated with *any* type of trauma can linger for weeks, months, years, and even a lifetime, unless they are addressed and worked through. What does that mean, to work through a trauma? It is a complicated question with no specific answer. However, experts agree that the one thing you shouldn’t do is avoid the thoughts and feelings associated with any trauma. Approaching the memories and feelings associated with a trauma can be hard work and should be done carefully and thoughtfully, but the payoff is a clearer mind, a lighter heart, and true healing that can help you have a more fulfilling, authentic life.

This worksheet is designed to help you identify how a trauma has affected your daily life and to give you some tools and resources to face your thoughts and feelings even though they may be disturbing.

What to Do

In the space below, write a brief summary of the past traumatic situation or situations that are troubling you in the present and that you find yourself not wanting to think about. Just share the facts here. You will describe the feelings in another section.

What do you notice you do to *avoid* the unpleasant feelings related to your trauma(s)? For instance, overeat, abuse substances, space out, avoid talking about it, get mad at yourself, lash out at others, numb out by watching TV or playing video games, and so on.

What are your *fears* when you think about what it would mean to remember and work on your trauma(s) on your own or in therapy? For instance, "I'd go crazy," "I'd lose it," "I would start to cry and never be able to stop," "I'd be so angry I'd want to kill people," "I wouldn't be able to function," and so on.

Good for you for having the courage to identify your concerns above. Identifying and acknowledging the depth of the impact of trauma on your life is an important first step. Most experts recommend working with a therapist or counselor familiar with trauma and trauma recovery to see if you suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or another associated psychological disorder.

In the meantime, here are some coping mechanisms for dealing with traumatic memories instead of avoiding them. See which ones might fit for you. Take it slowly.

- **Find someone to talk to.** If you tend to avoid talking or thinking about your past trauma or traumas, you might be making matters worse. Know that you are not alone. It is OK

to ask for help. Sharing your current feelings and concerns and, if/when you are ready, your past experiences, takes courage but the benefits are well worthwhile. If your symptoms are severe, please find a licensed mental health professional who has a lot of experience working with trauma survivors.

- **Mindful breathing**, which means paying attention in a nonjudgmental way to your breath. Notice the inhale and exhale. Notice where you feel the air go in—the nose, the mouth? Notice the rise and fall of your chest or belly. Let go of worry or judgment in the moment. If your mind wanders, bring it back to the breath. There are many apps and YouTube videos and other resources on this website available to help you learn and practice mindful breathing. Studies show that deep, slow, diaphragmatic breathing (abdominal breathing) can “trick” the brain into thinking you are relaxed, thus lowering your “fight-or-flight” feelings or reactions.

NOTE: If focusing on your breath is triggering traumatic memories, shift your focus to something outside yourself such as colors, sounds, or objects in the environment.

- **Learn meditation.** There are many different kinds of meditation you can learn—some involve repeating a “mantra” or simple sound or phrase to yourself over and over while sitting in a comfortable position with your eyes closed. Some people like to think the word “peace” or “calm” or “relax.” Some forms of meditation don’t require you to close your eyes, which can be uncomfortable for people with a trauma history. Check out resources on our website or look into the many apps available, such as www.insighttimer.com, www.calm.com, www.headspace.com, to name a few.
- **Practice yoga.** Researchers have found that trauma and its associated memories can be stored in our bodies and cause distress. Yoga offers people an opportunity to move safely and gently through various positions and stretches, which can help release stuck emotions and help you become more aware of the connection between your mind and body, and thus feel stronger and more empowered.
- **EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) therapy** is a treatment that has been shown to be very effective in helping people work with and release traumatic memories. It involves working with a trained therapist who gives you specific verbal instructions, often using sounds or a panel of lights, to guide you to “relocate” memories from one part of the brain to the other. This process helps people experience the remembered event as actually being in the past, so it doesn’t interfere with their life and they feel more empowered. Nothing physical actually changes with EMDR. Check your local listings for an EMDR-certified therapist to learn more.
- **Attend a support groups for trauma survivors.** Many communities offer support groups through their local hospital, mental health center, or religious institutions. Meetups or self-help groups for survivors can also be helpful. Breaking through the isolation and feeling less alone are known to be key components of recovering from trauma.

Reflections on This Exercise

1. What did you learn from this exercise that you did not know before?

2. What are some remaining fears and worries about facing your trauma?

3. How motivated are you now to work on facing your trauma? What do you think you will gain by pursuing help?

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What could you do differently to make progress in this area?
