

# Coping with Trauma Following an Automobile Accident

## Objective

To cope with distressing emotional symptoms following an automobile accident.

## What to Know

If you were in a motor vehicle accident, you might have experienced many different feelings – immediately after the accident and in the days and months following it, including:

- shock
- trouble believing it really happened
- anger
- overwhelm
- problems concentrating or focusing
- nervousness or worry
- flashbacks of the accident
- fear or uneasiness
- guilt
- hypervigilance
- nightmares
- anxiousness about driving or being a passenger in an automobile
- fear of getting into another accident
- driving avoidance
- continuous thoughts about the accident

Many people experience emotional distress following a motor vehicle accident. Most people have some (or all) of the above symptoms for a period of time following the accident. After the initial shock has subsided, you might not even realize how the accident affected your mental health. Sometimes these feelings can be so strong they keep you from living a normal life.

For most people, the feelings go away over time. But sometimes symptoms linger or become more intense, changing the way you think and act. Intense feelings that stay with you for a long time and get in the way of everyday life are signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). If you have post-traumatic stress after a car accident, you may have some of the following problems. Check off any that apply to you.

\_\_\_ ongoing uneasiness

\_\_\_ anxiety about driving or riding in vehicles

\_\_\_ not wanting to have medical tests or procedures done

\_\_\_ irritability or anger

\_\_\_ excessive worry

- nightmares or trouble sleeping
- feeling you are not connected to events or people
- disturbing memories of the accident you cannot stop or control
- difficulty eating or lack of appetite
- thoughts, memories, or feelings that disrupt daily life
- reliance on drugs or alcohol to cope
- thoughts of hurting yourself or others
- Total checked statements**

If you checked off three or more statements, you might be experiencing post-traumatic stress, and seeking help from a therapist or counselor that specializes in treating trauma may be helpful.

Here are a few things you can do to work through and overcome the trauma associated with the car accident.

- 1. Increase self-care.** When distressed or anxious, you might neglect your basic needs such as getting enough sleep, eating nutritious meals, exercising, and socializing. Focus on basic self-care tasks and stress management every day.
- 2. Focus on things you can control.** Practice using good driving behaviors such as always wearing your seatbelt and minimizing distractions while driving.
- 3. Talk to loved ones.** Review the details of the accident. Talk about your thoughts and feelings during and after the accident.
- 4. Stay active.** Exercise every day – even if you just go outside for a 10-minute walk.
- 5. Follow up with your doctor.** Your doctor can give you referrals to other health care providers, monitor your recovery, and prescribe any medicine you may need.
- 6. Get back to daily activities and routines.** Perhaps after the accident you limited what you did. It is important to try to get back to your usual activities, even if you are uncomfortable or scared at first.
- 7. Learn to be a defensive driver.** Driving or riding in cars might be hard after the accident. You can lower your risk of future accidents by practicing defensive driving, which includes driving carefully, wearing your seat belt, and avoiding distractions. Avoid driving when you are tired, and never drive if you have had alcohol or taken drugs or medicines that affect your judgment.
- 8. Seek Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) treatment.** This treatment can help you feel less triggered by traumatic memories by helping you reprocess the way you experience those memories. You can learn more at <https://www.emdria.org/>

**9. Engage in Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PET).** Exposure therapy is a form of cognitive behavioral therapy that is used to treat PTSD. In PET, you would confront your fear by reliving or experiencing the thing that is causing fear and anxiety. For example, you might describe the details of the accident, work toward driving on your own in a parking lot, then traveling on a backroad, and eventually driving on busier roads and highways. Your therapist can help you with this.

With help from loved ones, a mental health professional, and using EMDR or PET, you can effectively process the accident-related trauma.

### **What to Do**

Describe the motor vehicle accident. What happened? Who was involved? Where did it happen? Were you the driver or the passenger?

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When did the accident happen? \_\_\_\_\_

What symptoms are you experiencing?

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Rate your symptoms from 1-10, where 1 = very minor distress, to 10 = I am so distressed or anxious I cannot function: \_\_\_\_\_

You can begin to cope with distressing emotional symptoms following the accident by practicing some of the above suggestions. Though EMDR and PET are done with a trained mental health professional, write down some of the other ideas you are willing to try.

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What else can you do to cope and recover from the accident?

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Use the chart below for two weeks and write down at least one activity you do each day to cope. For example, one day you might talk about the accident with a loved one and take a 20-minute walk outside. Write down how you felt before and after the activity. Rate your symptoms or distress from 1-10, where 1 = very minor, to 10 = I am so distressed or anxious I cannot function. Write down any comments or notes.

Date	How do you feel? 1-10	Activity	How do you feel? 1-10	Comments

Date	How do you feel? 1-10	Activity	How do you feel? 1-10	Comments

Did this exercise help you cope? Why or why not?

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### Reflections on This Exercise

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

What did you learn from this exercise?

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