



DEFINING TRAUMA

What is trauma?

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Services Administration (SAMHSA) trauma results from an **event**, series of events, or set of circumstances that is **experienced** by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse **effects** on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being

What is the impact of trauma?

Trauma can impact individuals in many ways, including socially, psychologically, academically, physiologically, and socioeconomically, and can impair physical health as well. The more an individual is exposed to a variety of stressful and potentially traumatic experiences, the greater the risk for chronic health conditions and health risk behaviors later in life.

Examples of potential traumatic events and experiences

Traumatic events may be experienced or witnessed. They may be sudden and brief or long lasting. Here are several examples of events that may lead to traumatic effects:

- Diagnosis of severe illness or medical condition
- Chronic medical or mental health conditions, as well as some highly invasive medical procedure(s)
- Prolonged separation from family members
- Death of a parent, significant other or loved one
- Neglect during childhood
- Physical and sexual abuse
- Family alcohol or substance use disorders
- Domestic/intimate partners violence
- Chronic marital or partner discord
- Systemic discrimination, racism, oppression, and genocide

- Unemployment or underemployment
- Homelessness or housing insecure
- Poverty
- Gender issues
- Community violence
- Displacement and other refugee experiences
- Environmental disasters, such as pandemics, hurricanes, wildfires, earthquakes
- Human-made disasters, such as school shootings, terrorist attacks, war
- Bullying

Factors influencing the effects of traumatic events and experiences

The effects of traumatic events can be influenced by several factors. Depending on the specific nature of the event, these may include:

- How severe the event was
- How old a person was when it happened and other personal characteristics, such as temperament or prior mental health challenges
- How badly a person was hurt or could have been hurt
- How close someone was to the place where the event happened
- What or who stopped the event and whether anybody came to help
- Whether a person felt they could tell anyone, or were made to feel scared or guilty if they did
- How people reacted, whether they believed us, and how caring and concerned they seemed
- If the event was caused by a person, whether that person was a stranger, someone familiar to us, someone we expected to be able to trust, or someone who was supposed to protect us
- Whether the event occurred more than once, how often it occurred, and for how long
- Whether it resulted in long-lasting disruptions in our lives
- Whether we had previously experienced another traumatic event

Recognizing a trauma response

Trauma affects people differently depending on whether they have experienced it once, repeatedly, or over the course of time.

Initial trauma responses may include:

- Anxiety
- Avoidance of similar situations
- Confusion
- Disassociation
- Exhaustion
- Fear
- Feeling or acting “numb”

Delayed trauma responses, which occur longer after traumatic events have occurred, may include:

- Anxiety about flashbacks
- Avoiding any feelings or activities related to the event
- Depression
- Fatigue or other sleep disorders
- Fear of the event happening again

More severe trauma responses may include:

- Distress with no relief or moments of calm
- Intense, intrusive thoughts of traumatic events
- Severe dissociation