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## **Managing Stress and Recovering from Trauma: Facts and Resources for Veterans and Families**

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### **A National Center for PTSD Fact Sheet**

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#### **Symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress**

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Have you ever:

- felt so tense, discouraged, or angry that you were afraid you just couldn't cope?
- had an extremely stressful experience that you try not to think about, but it still continues to bother you or is repeated in nightmares?
- felt constantly on guard or watchful, or been on edge or jumpy more than you really need to be?
- had a family member who seemed troubled in these ways?

If so, this information is for you.

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#### **Everyone Experiences Stress**

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Stress is a *normal* response of the body and mind. Everyone feels stress when gearing up to deal with major life events (such as marriage, divorce, births, deaths, or starting or ending a job) or handling everyday hassles like arguments, financial headaches, deadlines, or traffic jams.

*Physical signs* of a stress response include:

- Rapid heartbeat
- Headaches
- Stomach aches
- Muscle tension

*Emotional signs* of stress can be both positive and upsetting:

## Coping with Traumatic Stress Reactions (continued)

- Excitement
- Exhilaration
- Joy

and

- Frustration
- Nervousness
- Discouragement
- Anxiety
- Anger

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### Stress Can Become a Problem

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Repeated stress drains and wears down your body and mind. Stress is like starting a car engine or pushing the accelerator pedal to speed up. If you keep revving up the car, you'll burn out the starter and wear out both the brakes and the engine.

Burnout occurs when repeated stress is not balanced by healthy time outs for genuine relaxation. Stress need not be a problem if you manage it by smoothly and calmly entering or leaving life's fast lane.

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### Managing Stress

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Stress Management involves responding to major life events and everyday hassles by *relaxing* as well as *tensing up*. Relaxation actually is a part of the normal stress response. When faced with life's challenges, people not only tense up to react rapidly and forcefully, but they also become calm in order to think clearly and act with control.

*Techniques for managing stress include:*

- Body and mental relaxation
- Positive thinking
- Problem solving
- Anger control
- Time management
- Exercise
- Responsible assertiveness
- Interpersonal communication

*Physical benefits of managing stress include:*

- Better sleep, energy, strength, and mobility

## Coping with Traumatic Stress Reactions (continued)

- Reduced tension, pain, blood pressure, heart problems, and infectious illnesses

*Emotional benefits* of managing stress include:

- Increased quality of life and well-being
- Reduced anxiety, depression, and irritability

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### Can stress become unmanageable?

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Trauma can cause severe stress, which may become unmanageable despite the best efforts of good stress management. Let's look at why this happens and what you can do about it.

Traumatic events cause severe stress reactions that are particularly hard to manage. Trauma involves a unique kind of physical/emotional shock that escalates the "fight-flight" stress response (feeling angry or scared) into "super-stress" (feeling terrified, stunned, horrified, like your life is passing before your eyes, or so overwhelmed you blank out).

Trauma occurs when a person directly experiences or witnesses:

- Unexpected death
- Severe physical injury or suffering
- Close calls with death or injury
- Sexual violation

If you have ever experienced or witnessed war, disaster, a terrible accident, sexual or physical abuse or assault, kidnapping or hostage-taking, or life-threatening illnesses, you know the shock of trauma.

Nothing in life ever seems quite the same again, even if everything works out for the best. Trauma leaves a lasting imprint of terror, horror, and helplessness on the body and the mind. The world no longer seems safe, manageable, or enjoyable. People no longer seem trustworthy or dependable. Self-doubt and guilt eat away at your self-esteem. Faith and spirituality are shaken or lost.

Traumatic stress can be managed, but special steps are necessary.

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### Steps in Managing Traumatic Stress

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**Step One** is recognizing the signs of posttraumatic stress. Trauma is so shocking that it causes memories that are impossible to forget or sometimes impossible to recall. Trauma memories often repeatedly come back when you are not trying to think about them. Memories arise as unpleasant thoughts or nightmares. Sometimes you may feel

## Coping with Traumatic Stress Reactions (continued)

as if you cannot stop reliving the event. The shock of trauma also may create blank spaces in your memory because it is too much for the mind to handle, and so the mind takes a time out.

Traumatic stress reactions are *normal* responses to *abnormal* events. Most people experience posttraumatic stress reactions for days or even weeks after a trauma. Usually these reactions become less severe over time, but they may persist and become a problem.

**Step Two** is recognizing the ways of coping with traumatic stress that are natural but *don't* work, because they actually prolong and worsen the normal posttraumatic stress reactions. The ways of coping that do not work include:

- Trying to avoid people, places, or thoughts that are reminders
- Shutting off feelings or connections to other people that are reminders
- Being hyper-vigilant or on guard

Trying to avoid bad memories, trying to shut out feelings or people, or trying to stay always alert may seem reasonable. However, they don't work because trauma controls your life if you run from it.

**Step Three** is to get help from one of several special VA services for veterans (and their families) who are coping with traumatic stress reactions or PTSD (Posttraumatic Stress Disorder). Trauma memories cannot be erased, but the stress they cause can become very manageable.

Find out more about PTSD resources for veterans and families by calling directly or discussing the programs with your physician or nurse. Contact your local [Vet Center](#) or one of the VA's specialized PTSD treatment programs.

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