

# When a Friend or Loved One Has Been Traumatized

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International Society  
for Traumatic Stress Studies

Traumatic events are not rare. Between 55 and 70% of people will experience at least one traumatic event in their lifetimes. Most will experience more than one. These events not only affect individuals, but also their family, friends, and coworkers. It is important for those who have experienced these events to have the support of friends, family, and others. It is also important that these supporters understand their loved ones' reactions as well as their own, so they can help them through the difficult times that accompany and follow traumatic events.

## Natural responses to traumatic events

Most people who experience traumatic events will have normal stress responses and experience some difficulties for a period of time. However, many also experience more significant distress and trauma reactions. In order for friends and family to support a loved one during this difficult time, it is important for them to understand natural reactions to traumatic events. Physical and sexual assaults and abuse are traumatic events and can cause effects that are similar to other life-threatening events such as war or natural disasters.

There is a range of reactions that are normal immediately following an assault. Some survivors may be very upset and may cry, yell, or shake. Others may seem calm and composed or even numb, cold, and detached. They may want to talk about the traumatic experience or they may wish to remain quiet. Some may want physical contact while others may not want to be touched. They may have any number of emotions including feelings of fear, anger, guilt, sadness, and confusion.

Some individuals who have endured traumatic situations, despite how they are feeling, may believe it is necessary to assure others that they are fine. They may not want to “bother” others with their continuing problems or may want to get “back to normal.” Some will use alcohol, drugs, sexual promiscuity, overeating, or overworking to numb their feelings. Survivors may experience nightmares, insomnia or excessive sleeping, changes in eating, sexual problems, physical aches and pains, difficulty concentrating, and loss of interest in activities and in others. They may have frequent, disturbing memories of the traumatic event. It is common for people to experience mood swings during this time, and survivors may misdirect anger toward others or toward themselves. They may feel dependent upon or become overprotective of others. Problems with trust and intimacy are common.

These reactions are typical for victims of traumatic life events. However, each individual may experience unique reactions or may alternate among these reactions.

## Reactions of friends and family

When an individual learns that a loved one has been assaulted or abused, he or she may experience a range of emotions that are similar to the emotions of the loved one. Some of these include feelings of helplessness and confusion, anger, guilt, fear, and depression. People often want to help, but may get conflicting messages from the survivor, feel helpless and confused in the face of the pain, and may not know what to do. Below are some reactions of the friends and loved ones of survivors of physical and sexual assault and abuse.

“What has been hardest for me is feeling helpless and not knowing what to do, as this has driven a huge wedge between us.” “Frustration is the thing that gets to me. I feel I can’t do anything to help.”

“I have nowhere to go with my anger over this and that is hard; I cannot discuss anything with her as it is a taboo subject. I don’t even know what happened and no one will tell me so of course I imagine all sorts of horrid things based on the few details I know.”

“People don’t understand that what happened is hard for both of us. Everyday I think about what this guy did to my girlfriend and I want to do something about it but my girlfriend just keeps everything inside. She doesn’t want to talk about it or get help. I realize I can’t push her to get help but I feel lost about the situation.”

“I also think that it hits really close to home because, being a woman, I have always been petrified of being raped.... I am still terrified that it will happen to me and even more so now. I don’t know how I would ever recover from it and just pray it never happens to me. I still can’t believe what happened to my sister; it is hard to comprehend.”

“My son’s disclosure was gradual. My mind was taken over with thoughts of what he endured; I could think of nothing else. In my private moments, I cried my heart out. Other times I walked around like a zombie and went through the motions of life. I wondered if I could ever return to a normal thought pattern or ever feel happy again.”

## What should friends do if someone they care for has been a traumatized?

**Support:** Be there for the survivor. Often, friends and family of the survivor will feel a need to “problem solve” or offer advice. However, physical presence and support are usually more valuable. Do not comment on what the survivor should have done or tell him or her what to do now.

**Education:** Educate yourself about trauma and the healing process. Learn about common reactions to traumatic experiences and about resources by attending classes, viewing films, reading books, searching the Internet, or talking to a counselor.

**Communicate about the assault:** Listen and allow the survivor to talk about the traumatic experience at his or her own pace. Friends can let the survivor know that they are there to listen and give support when the survivor is ready. Believe the survivor and validate his or her feelings and reactions. Do not minimize what the survivor has been through by saying things like, “it could have been worse.” Be clear that the abuse or assault was not the survivor’s fault and do not question or judge what he or she did to survive. Friends can share their feelings honestly and openly and reassure the survivor of their love and concern. Friends can also communicate their support through their behavior. Because the survivor may feel uncomfortable with physical contact, it is helpful to ask before touching or hugging him or her.

**Do not focus solely on the assault:** Take a break from talking about it. Follow the survivor’s lead on when to talk about it and when to take a break. Allow time for mutual relaxation and pleasant activities.

**Broaden the social support network:** Friends can encourage survivors to get additional support. This support may come from other friends and family members, religious institutions, support groups, self-help resources, crisis counseling agencies, or trained mental health professionals. Friends and family may also seek personal, couples, or family counseling if they are troubled by “secondary” trauma reactions such as their own thoughts or images of what happened to the survivor, anxiety, depression, fears, anger, addiction, or relationship problems.

**Return control:** Friends must respect the time and space it takes to heal. This requires patience. By respecting the survivors’ wishes and allowing them to make decisions, friends help return control to them.

“We can’t be in their shoes. We can only do a few things. We can TRY to understand them. We can love them. We MUST NOT take things personally, and we can’t be offended by what they do. They are hurting.”

“The most important thing to remember, whether or not you agree with what she decides to do, is be supportive. She has already had enough control taken away from her... she needs ultimate control and she needs to know that you love her no matter what she decides to do.”

## The appreciation of survivors

Although they may not always be able to express it, survivors will appreciate the support of friends and family.

“You are all very wonderful for taking the time... to find out what to do and how to help your loved ones who are survivors of abuse of some kind. What would we do without you? We would be lost and lonely. If it weren't for those who love us, we wouldn't be able to make it! Thank you all so very much.”

“I am a rape survivor. I just wanted to say thank you to all who... want to aid healing of their loved ones. We survivors may not make sense a lot of the time, and you may feel confused and bewildered, but just by being there and loving us anyway, you do a great deal. Thanks so much!”

A family doctor, clergy person, local mental health association, state psychiatric, psychological, or social work association, or health insurer may be helpful in providing a referral to a counselor or therapist with experience in treating people affected by traumatic stress. For more information about traumatic stress or the International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies, call 1-847-686-2234.

## What is ISTSS?

The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies is a nonprofit organization whose goal is to ensure that everyone affected by trauma receives the best possible professional response, and to reduce traumatic stressors and their immediate and longterm consequences worldwide.

ISTSS provides an independent community for supporting and sharing research, clinical strategies, public policy concerns and theoretical formulations on trauma. ISTSS members include psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, nurses, counselors, researchers, journalists, clergy, law enforcement, correctional facilities administrators, advocates and others with an interest in the treatment and study of traumatic stress.

Members work in clinical and nonclinical settings around the world, including public and private health facilities, private practice, universities and research foundations. This pamphlet was created by the Public Education Committee of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies.

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