



Recognising trauma and seeking help

Anyone who has to flee their home country for fear of their life has experienced terrible things. Often they have seen things of unbelievable cruelty. It's hard or even impossible to talk about such things – especially when you've lost friends or relatives and fled to a foreign country with a foreign culture. But it is important to come to terms with the experience of fleeing and to recognize if you are traumatized and how to deal with such traumas.



A trauma is a real injury, like a broken leg or a gaping wound. You just can't see this injury, even if it was caused by violence. Our body tries to deal with the injury and has various ways and means of doing so. Thus, a trauma often affects every part of us: our body, thinking, feelings and social behaviour.

Could I be traumatised or somebody I know is?

After a traumatic experience, the characteristics and symptoms can be very varied. Lack of concentration is one indication. This can get so bad that you can no longer cope with your everyday life. Some trauma sufferers can no longer perceive things properly, feel numb or are very anxious. Often your perception of things changes and you feel things differently than before. Other symptoms include fatigue, disturbed sleep, nightmares, panic attacks or hyperactivity.



This is often accompanied by physical discomfort: Trauma sufferers complain of tensed-up muscles, headaches, abdominal pain or nausea. Yet in many cases no doctor can detect a disease. There may also be changes in behaviour. Adults, for example, may start drinking alcohol or taking drugs in excessive quantities. Children may suffer from attention deficit syndrome or refuse to talk. Another important indication is indicating that you want to commit suicide. In this case, help can only come from hospital treatment.



What you notice about yourself is that you're hardly enjoying life any more, that you have self-doubts, and perhaps even think you're going crazy. If this is the case, you should be aware that it's not you who are crazy but what has happened to you. As a result of these symptoms, some people withdraw and have less contact with other people, even friends or family.



If you notice that you or anybody else is suffering from some of these symptoms, you should definitely go and talk to somebody. Trauma symptoms may first appear after several weeks or months. That often happens when you calm down. Traumatized people typically experience the event being relived suddenly and without warning. This is uncontrollable.

The sudden reoccurrence of the traumatic experience may be triggered by smells, colours, images or feelings associated with the traumatic event – so-called triggers, re-living the event through flashbacks. You feel you're really back in the traumatic situation and your response is again fear and panic.

Can a traumatised person be healed?

If you notice any symptoms of trauma in yourself or other people, you should always seek professional help. This is especially true if the symptoms do not go away, even after some time. Our body has great self-healing powers and many traumatized people become healthy again over time. In many cases the reactions or their severity and the problems themselves subside in the first days and weeks.



However, if this is not the case or the symptoms get more severe, a doctor should be consulted. It is important that nobody needs to be ashamed that the body has reacted so violently to such bad things. That is not a sign of weakness! But you should certainly talk to someone you trust.

No matter what has happened to a traumatized person, he or she is not to blame. A traumatic experience will probably never be completely forgotten and it will always leave a scar, but a trauma or a post-traumatic stress disorder can be properly treated today. There is every reason to be hopeful of recovery.



What does help?

As mentioned above, it does help, as an initial step, to confide in somebody. But traumatised people can also do something themselves. For example, it helps to keep stress levels low and practice self-soothing techniques. And even if it is difficult, it makes sense to avoid the smells, colours, images or feelings that trigger memories of the trauma.



Instead, a traumatised person should do things they enjoy and do well. It helps to develop the skills you enjoy, e.g. at school or during your vocational training course. Other factors can also counteract the trauma, including fellowship and time spent in the company of friends, relatives and parents, optimistic future prospects and routines – all things you can plan and look forward to in your daily life.

It is also good to have someone who listens to and stands up for a traumatised person. There is also evidence that faith in God can help overcome a trauma. If you would like more information, please contact a church in your area or the person who gave you the reference to Deutschland-Begleiter.de.

Culture shock and interaction with others

It is important to take the signs of trauma seriously, talk about them and seek help. But having one or two of the symptoms mentioned here is not always a sign of trauma. Sometimes it can also be a so-called culture shock, i.e. the stress of getting along with foreign people in a foreign country. This culture shock often occurs in the first months of being abroad.

