

# Health and Trauma

## What is Trauma?

Individual trauma is a result of an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that can be sudden or drawn out, which present physical or emotional harm to an individual, or are life threatening. Traumatic events may have lasting adverse effects on an individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. <sup>1</sup>

**90%**

of adults in the United States have been exposed to at least one traumatic event in their lifetimes. Exposure to multiple traumatic events throughout an individual's lifetime is common. <sup>2</sup>

Traumatic events can include crime, disasters, abuse, and more. In the United States,

**25,000,000**

individuals in 2017 were affected by natural disasters <sup>3</sup>

**10,000,000**

individuals experience domestic violence annually <sup>4</sup>

**1,200,000**

individuals are victims of violent crime annually <sup>5</sup>

## What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder is a mental health condition that may develop after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event resulting in heightened and prolonged stress response. <sup>6</sup>

**8,000,000**

adults in the United States experience Posttraumatic Stress Disorder each year, equivalent to the population of the state of Virginia. <sup>7,8</sup>

**8%**

of the United States population will experience Posttraumatic Stress Disorder during their lifetimes <sup>9</sup>

Rates of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) differ among American men and women. Additionally, certain populations in the United States experience trauma and PTSD at higher levels than the national average.

It is estimated that,



African Americans experience high rates of trauma exposure and PTSD <sup>12</sup>



American Indian and Alaska Natives experience high rates of trauma exposure and PTSD <sup>13</sup>



LGBTQ individuals experience high rates trauma exposure and PTSD <sup>14</sup>

**4%** of men will develop PTSD during their lifetimes <sup>10</sup>

**10%** of women will develop PTSD during their lifetimes <sup>11</sup>

**46%** of Holocaust survivors have PTSD <sup>15</sup>

**35%** of first responders have PTSD <sup>16,17</sup>

**30%** of Vietnam veterans have had PTSD <sup>18</sup>

**30%** of refugees have PTSD <sup>19</sup>

**21%** of Latino immigrant parents have PTSD <sup>20</sup>



# Health and Trauma

## Trauma and Health are Linked

As established in the landmark Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) study, there is a 'strong and cumulative' link between trauma experienced in childhood and poor health in adulthood.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, trauma experienced in adulthood is associated with poor health outcomes experienced later in life. An individual's trauma exposure is linked to their propensity for developing a wide range of conditions that negatively impact their physical, mental, and cognitive health.

## Trauma and Brain Health

Traumatic events can affect various areas of the brain and can lead to lasting changes in neurological response resulting in persistent traumatic stress symptoms. These symptoms include constant fear, hypervigilance, and difficulties sleeping, concentrating, thinking clearly, and managing emotions.<sup>31</sup>

## Trauma and Health Risk Behaviors

Trauma exposure is associated with the adoption of risky health behaviors such as,<sup>32, 33, 34, 35</sup>

- Miscalculating risk or danger, or responding disproportionately
- Unhealthy behaviors of avoidance, isolation, or dependence
- Unhealthy coping mechanisms such as substance abuse



## PTSD, Veterans, and Health Risk Behaviors

One study showed the link between PTSD symptoms in veterans and increased likelihood and frequency of thrill-seeking, sexual risk-taking, firearm possession, alcohol, and substance use, drinking and driving, and interpersonal aggression. These behaviors, generally, are linked to negative health outcomes such as sexually transmitted infections and liver disease.<sup>36</sup>

## The Difficulty of Seeking Help

Survivors of trauma may have trouble seeking help with trauma symptoms or associated health consequences because,

- Trauma survivors may fear the stigma or shame associated with their trauma history
- Trauma survivors may avoid socialization and care as a coping mechanism
- Trauma survivors may not see the role of trauma in their health
- Trauma survivors may face institutional and cultural barriers for reporting trauma and seeking help
- Trauma survivors have limited access to person-centered, trauma-informed care.

Trauma is associated with the following health conditions: <sup>22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30</sup>



## Physical Health

- Lung disease
- Gum disease
- Fibromyalgia
- Chronic fatigue
- Cardiovascular disease
- Gastrointestinal disorders
- Endocrine disorders
- Reproductive disorders



## Mental Health

- Anxiety
- Depression
- Suicidal Ideation
- Mood Disorders
- Eating disorders
- Substance abuse



## Cognitive Health

- Dementia
- Sleep Disorders
- Cognitive Impairments



## Seeking Help Can Retraumatize

Medical professionals may not screen for trauma or relate it to health conditions

Providing medical history and revealing trauma histories may retraumatize survivors

Medical procedures or clinical settings may retraumatize survivors



## Sources

1. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014) SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. [https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA\\_Trauma.pdf](https://ncsacw.samhsa.gov/userfiles/files/SAMHSA_Trauma.pdf)
2. Kilpatrick, D. G., Resnick, H. S., Milanak, M. E., Miller, M. W., Keyes, K. M., & Friedman, M. J. (2013). National estimates of exposure to traumatic events and PTSD prevalence using DSM-IV and DSM-5 criteria. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 26*(5), 537-547. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.21848>
3. Federal Emergency Management Agency (December 30, 2017). FEMA Reflects on a Historical Year [Press Release]. <https://www.fema.gov/es/news-release/20200220/fema-reflexiona-sobre-un-ano-historico>
4. National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (2020). Domestic Violence [Fact Sheet]. [https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/domestic\\_violence-2020080709350855.pdf?1596811079991](https://assets.speakcdn.com/assets/2497/domestic_violence-2020080709350855.pdf?1596811079991).
5. U.S. Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Investigation (2019). Uniform Crime Report - Crime in the United States, 2018. <https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2018/crime-in-the-u.s.-2018/topic-pages/violent-crime.pdf>
6. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD. PTSD Basics. [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/what/ptsd\\_basics.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/what/ptsd_basics.asp)
7. United States Census Bureau (2019). State Population Totals and Components of Change: 2010-2019. [https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-state-total.html#par\\_textimage\\_1574439295](https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/popest/2010s-state-total.html#par_textimage_1574439295)
8. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD. How Common is PTSD in Adults? [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common\\_adults.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_adults.asp)
9. Ibid
10. Ibid
11. Ibid
12. Pérez Benítez, C. I., Sibrava, N. J., Kohn-Wood, L., Bjornsson, A. S., Zlotnick, C., Weisberg, R., & Keller, M. B. (2014). Posttraumatic stress disorder in African Americans: a two year follow-up study. *Psychiatry Research, 220*(1-2), 376-383. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2014.07.020>
13. Bassett, D., Buchwald, D., & Manson, S. (2014). Posttraumatic stress disorder and symptoms among American Indians and Alaska Natives: a review of the literature. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, 49*(3), 417-433. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-013-0759-y>
14. Ellis, A. Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer Individuals. American Psychological Association Trauma Psychology, Division 56.
15. Kuch, K., & Cox, B. J. (1992). Symptoms of PTSD in 124 survivors of the Holocaust. *The American Journal of Psychiatry, 149*(3), 337-340. <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.149.3.337>
16. Heyman, M., Dill, J., & Douglas, R. (2018). The Ruderman White Paper on Mental Health and Suicide of First Responders [White Paper]. Ruderman Family Foundation. [http://dir.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/dirnv.gov/content/WCS/Training-Docs/First%20Responder%20White%20Paper\\_Final%20\(2\).pdf](http://dir.nv.gov/uploadedFiles/dirnv.gov/content/WCS/Training-Docs/First%20Responder%20White%20Paper_Final%20(2).pdf)
17. Lewis-Schroeder, N. F., Kieran, K., Murphy, B. L., Wolff, J. D., Robinson, M. A., & Kaufman, M. L. (2018). Conceptualization, Assessment, and Treatment of Traumatic Stress in First Responders: A Review of Critical Issues. *Harvard review of psychiatry, 26*(4), 216-227. <https://doi.org/10.1097/HRP.0000000000000176>
18. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD. How Common is PTSD in Adults? [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common\\_adults.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/common_adults.asp)
19. Abu Suhaiban, H., Grasser, L. R., & Javanbakht, A. (2019). Mental Health of Refugees and Torture Survivors: A Critical Review of Prevalence, Predictors, and Integrated Care. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 16*(13), 2309. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph16132309>

Want to know more?

Visit our website  
[AgingAndTrauma.org](https://AgingAndTrauma.org)

Email us  
[Aging@JFNA.org](mailto:Aging@JFNA.org)



## Sources

20. Perreira, K. M., & Ornelas, I. (2013). Painful Passages: Traumatic Experiences and Post-Traumatic Stress among Immigrant Latino Adolescents and their Primary Caregivers. *The International Migration Review*, 47(4), 10.1111/imre.12050. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imre.12050>
21. Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American journal of preventive medicine*, 14(4), 245–258.
22. D'Andrea, W., Sharma, R., Zelechowski, A. D., & Spinazzola, J. (2011). Physical health problems after single trauma exposure: when stress takes root in the body. *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association*, 17(6), 378–392. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078390311425187>
23. de Oliveira Solis, A. C., Araújo, Á. C., Corchs, F., Bernik, M., Duran, É. P., Silva, C., & Lotufo-Neto, F. (2017). Impact of post-traumatic stress disorder on oral health. *Journal of affective disorders*, 219, 126–132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.05.033>
24. Jankowski, K. (2016). PTSD and Physical Health. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD. [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/ptsd\\_physical\\_health.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/cooccurring/ptsd_physical_health.asp)
25. Kelsch, N., & Kelsch, M. (2014). Identifying and Treating Patients with PTSD. Dental Learning. [https://www.dentallearning.net/files/PTSD\\_Web\\_CE\\_Bookmark.pdf](https://www.dentallearning.net/files/PTSD_Web_CE_Bookmark.pdf)
26. McFarlane A. C. (2010). The long-term costs of traumatic stress: intertwined physical and psychological consequences. *World psychiatry: official journal of the World Psychiatric Association (WPA)*, 9(1), 3–10. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2051-5545.2010.tb00254.x>
27. Mohlenhoff, B. S., O'Donovan, A., Weiner, M. W., & Neylan, T. C. (2017). Dementia Risk in Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: the Relevance of Sleep-Related Abnormalities in Brain Structure, Amyloid, and Inflammation. *Current Psychiatry Reports*, 19(11), 89. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11920-017-0835-1>
28. Rouxel, P., Heilmann, A., Demakakos, P., Aida, J., Tsakos, G., & Watt, R. G. (2016). Oral health-related quality of life and loneliness among older adults. *European Journal of Ageing*, 14(2), 101–109. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-016-0392-1>
29. Wyatt, G. E., Myers, H. F., Williams, J. K., Kitchen, C. R., Loeb, T., Carmona, J. V., Wyatt, L. E., Chin, D., & Presley, N. (2002). Does a history of trauma contribute to HIV risk for women of color? Implications for prevention and policy. *American journal of public health*, 92(4), 660–665. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.92.4.660>
30. Yaffee, K., Vittinghoff, E., Lindquist, K., Barnes, D., Covinsky, K. E., Neylan, T., Kluse, M., & Marmar, C. (2010). Posttraumatic stress disorder and risk of dementia among US veterans. *Archives of general psychiatry*, 67(6), 608–613. <https://doi.org/10.1001/archgenpsychiatry.2010.61>
31. Sweeton, J. (2017, March 13). How to heal the traumatized brain. *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/workings-well-being/201703/how-heal-the-traumatized-brain>
32. Augsburger, M., & Elbert, T. (2017). When do traumatic experiences alter risk-taking behavior? A machine learning analysis of reports from refugees. *PloS one*, 12(5), e0177617. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0177617>
33. Kianpoor M, & Bakhshani N. (2012) Trauma, Dissociation, and High-Risk Behaviors. *International Journal of High Risk Behavior and Addiction*, 1(1):9-13. <https://doi.org/10.5812/ijhrba.4624>
34. U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Center for PTSD. Negative Coping and PTSD. [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/gethelp/negative\\_coping.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/gethelp/negative_coping.asp)
35. Blanch, A., Rottnek, F., & Labby, D.(2019). A Public Health Approach to Trauma and Addiction. Center for Mental Health Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. [https://www.nasmhpd.org/sites/default/files/TAC\\_Paper\\_5\\_508C\\_0.pdf](https://www.nasmhpd.org/sites/default/files/TAC_Paper_5_508C_0.pdf)
36. Strom, T.Q, Leskela, J., James, L.M., Thuras, P.D., Voller, E., Weigel, R., Yutsis, M., Khaylis, A., Lindberg, J., & Holz, K.B. (2012). An Exploratory Examination of Risk-Taking Behavior and PTSD Symptom Severity in a Veteran Sample. *Military Medicine*, 177(4), 390–396. <https://doi.org/10.7205/MILMED-D-11-00133>

