

Five Keys to Beating Trauma

Life can be hard. Stressors of life, whether minor or life altering, affect many of us in this fallen world. Traumatic events can shock or overwhelm individuals and their ability to cope. For many of us, learning what trauma is, how to cope, and what treatment is available is not something we normally consider. Yet while sources of trauma and responses to trauma can vary widely, this article will provide an overview of several keys known to help people beat trauma and even thrive despite it.

Key 1: Learn about Trauma

Trauma reactions are normal responses to abnormal events. Common sources of trauma include:

- Accidents (e.g., vehicles, fires, workplace)
- Experiencing a violent crime, terrorism, or combat
- Natural Disasters (e.g., tornados, etc.)
- Serious Medical Events (life threatening illness, painful procedures, etc.)
- Abuse (physical, emotional or sexual abuse; or domestic abuse)

People who have experienced trauma often have intrusive thoughts and memories of the event such as nightmares and flashbacks. They often try to avoid thinking of the event or being around things that remind them of the event. Their thinking and mood are often negatively impacted, and depression, anxiety, and shame are common. They experience retriggering of strong emotions and fight, flight, or freeze responses occur often with little warning. Trauma does not simply heal over time as suggested by the old adage, “time heals all wounds”. Often, the most natural things people do - suppressing thoughts or trying to numb the strong emotions to cope with their trauma symptoms - accidentally keeps healing from occurring and prolongs suffering. Learning about trauma and how to respond to it in healthy ways is often more than half the battle.

Resource: Search the ACCFS website (www.accounseling.org) for “trauma” to listen to podcasts and read articles on this topic.

Key 2: Seek Evidence-Based Treatment

While traumatic events have occurred throughout the history of the world, effective treatments for trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are relatively new. In the last few decades, research has shed new light on what trauma does to the mind and body and what effective treatment looks like. Effective treatment is more available today than ever and there are several treatments that research shows provide more consistent, positive outcomes. Many people who experience a trauma assume that they will never heal and that there is no use trying to seek treatment. This could not be farther from the truth. While trauma can have deep, lasting, and even permanent effects, seeking good treatment can make the difference in a trauma *victim* moving on to become a trauma *survivor* and eventually an *overcomer*. There are several types of high-quality trauma and PTSD treatments that can be used alone or in combination.

Resource: Learn more by watching the brief videos describing various types of trauma treatment from the National Center on PTSD (www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/video/index.asp).

Key 3: Get Adequate Support

Experiencing trauma can be a very isolating experience. While some traumatic events impact entire communities (e.g., a tornado ravaging a town), other traumatic events are often privately carried by the victims (e.g., rape or sexual assault). Emotions of shame and a sense of overwhelming are common and because of this, many individuals cope with their pain alone. Our adversary Satan loves to compound the pain of trauma with isolation and shame. His cruelty in this is staggering. The good news is that it does not have to be this way. Individuals with strong support networks who feel emotionally

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supported are likely to recover more quickly and completely. While people differ in how much they want to talk through their personal pain with others, it is often very helpful for individuals seeking counseling for trauma to have a support person/s who participate periodically in counseling sessions and is involved to some degree in the treatment process.

Resource: Support people can read the article *Helping Someone with PTSD* to learn ways to help without hurting (www.helpguide.org/articles/ptsd-trauma/helping-someone-with-ptsd.htm).

Key 4: Body-Mind-Spirit-Social

Trauma does not just affect an individual's memories. It impacts their whole being. Of course, the severity of the trauma, how many times it occurred, whether they have a support network, and whether they received high-quality treatment will all combine to determine how pervasively a traumatic event affects a person over time. Because trauma can affect the whole person, the subsequent treatment and recovery needs to address all of these areas. For example, trauma often causes individuals to be hyper-vigilant and their bodies stay on high alert. This can lead to jumpiness, irritability, and difficulty sleeping. Learning skills to quiet one's body is as important as learning how to quiet one's mind. Trauma can leave people with beliefs such as no one can be trusted; survivor's guilt (Why did my friend die in that accident and I survived?); or one does not deserve to ever be happy again. Learning to recognize one's unhealthy self-talk and corresponding cognitive distortions is important in the healing journey. Experiencing a grieving process is often required for healing from trauma as well. Having supportive family, friends, and church community can be an incredible help in the recovery process.

Resource: Read the book *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk to develop a solid understanding of how trauma impacts the whole person and to understand how it can be effectively treated.

Key 5: Millstones to Stepping Stones

Trauma can crush an individual's spirit and harm their relationship with God. Very difficult questions about suffering, trusting God, and the nagging questions about "why?" often plague individuals. Our adversary Satan moves quickly and persistently to create additional pain, isolation, and doubts to the already wounded person's life. He wants the trauma and its tentacles to be as millstones around a victim's neck that drown them and continually harm their lives. Satan opposes efforts to heal and especially targets any way God's grace could redeem the painful circumstances. While we must be careful to not simplistically gloss over the impact of trauma, we must seek to encourage others that God is able to bring healing, transformation, and growth out of a traumatic experience. This does not mean the actual traumatic event was good or it was not painful. Rather, it means that, by God's grace, what Satan means for evil, God can redeem and transform for good. This often takes time and willingness to wrestle through difficult questions and doubts. Having people to walk alongside the trauma survivor to listen, pray, and dialogue is extremely helpful.

Resource: Search the ACCFS website (www.accounseling.org) for "suffering" to listen to podcasts and read articles on this topic.

Our prayer is that by considering this difficult topic and the keys known to be effective in addressing it, you and others can experience help, hope, and growth in the midst of trauma.