

Acute stress disorder: How can you help a loved one?

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You can take steps to help a loved one cope with stress brought on by a traumatic event, whether it's a result of an accident, violence of any kind—such as an assault; verbal, physical, domestic or sexual abuse; or military combat—or another type of trauma.

A person with [acute stress disorder](#) (ASD) has severe stress symptoms during the first month after the traumatic event. Often, this involves feeling afraid or on edge, flashbacks or nightmares, difficulty sleeping, or other symptoms. If your loved one has symptoms that last longer than a month and make it hard to go about [daily routines](#), go to work or school, or handle important tasks, he or she could have post-[traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD).

Whether your loved one has ASD or PTSD, assessment and counseling (psychotherapy) by a professional can make a critical difference in recovery. Encourage him or her to talk to a doctor or a trained [mental health](#) professional.

You can also help by being a supportive listener, without attempting to "fix" the situation. Here are some suggestions:

Be willing to listen, but don't push. Make sure your loved one knows that you want to hear about his or her feelings. But if the person isn't ready or willing to talk about it, don't push. Just reassure your loved one that you'll be there if and when he or she is ready.

Choose a time to talk. When you're both ready to talk, choose a time and place where you'll be free of distractions and interruptions. Then truly listen. Ask questions if you don't understand something. But avoid any urges to second-guess, make assumptions, give advice or say, "I know just how you feel."

Recognize when to take a break. If you sense that the conversation is becoming too intense for your loved one, provide him or her with an opportunity to stop for now and take up the conversation again on another day. Then follow through.

Get help if talk of suicide occurs. If your loved one talks or behaves in a

way that makes you believe he or she might attempt suicide, respond calmly, but act immediately. Make sure the person is not left alone. If it's safe to do so, you may want to discreetly remove pills, firearms or any other objects that could be used for self-harm, and get help from a trained professional as soon as possible.

If you think your loved one may attempt suicide, get help:

Call 911 or your local emergency number immediately.

Call a [suicide](#) hotline number. In the U.S., call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255) any time of day to talk with a trained counselor. Use that same number and press "1" to reach the Veterans Crisis Line.

Coping with traumatic [stress](#) is an ongoing process, and there is no specific time frame for recovery. You might have many conversations with your loved one over weeks or months as he or she processes the traumatic experience during or after a period of professional care.

You'll be of more help to your loved one if you learn about ASD and PTSD from trusted medical sources and encourage your loved one to follow treatment recommendations. You may need to help your loved one stay connected with healthy social supports.

And don't forget to take care of yourself. Coping with trauma that happened to a loved one can be difficult to deal with, and it can make it harder for you to help your loved one if you don't take care of yourself. Take time for the things you enjoy, accept help from others when needed and make an appointment to see a mental health professional if you're struggling to cope.

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