

# Emotional medical trauma impacts caregivers of those with injuries and illness

May 22 2023, by Tess E. Smith-Thomas

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Caring for a loved one with a chronic or terminal illness or injury can be emotionally and physically exhausting. In addition to possible worries, stress, guilt, and fear of the unknown, caregivers can experience a loss of

identity and independence, and have trouble balancing other aspects of their lives and responsibilities while caring for their loved one. All of these challenges can place caregivers at risk for experiencing medical trauma.

Medical trauma is the [emotional response](#) to medical diagnoses, care or treatments. Medical care and treatment don't just affect the individual, but their loved ones as well. Every year, millions of caregivers experience symptoms of emotional medical trauma.

It is important for caregivers to recognize the signs and symptoms of medical trauma in others or in themselves. These symptoms can develop from a single medical experience or ongoing medical care. Symptoms of medical trauma can include:

- Avoidance: Avoiding reminders of medical care such as driving by the hospital, attending appointments, [phone calls](#) from [medical providers](#), talking or thinking about anything related to medical condition or care.
- Re-experiencing: Flashbacks of receiving a diagnosis or injury event or a part of [medical care](#), repeated conversations about the [medical condition](#) or care, thoughts repeating over and over again.
- Hyper-arousal: Difficulty sleeping, irritability, difficulty concentrating or feeling "on edge."
- Changes in mood/cognition: Increased feelings of sadness, frustration, and worries; negative thoughts; and withdrawing or isolating from others.

Here are some tips for caregivers to take care of themselves while caring for their ill or injured loved one:

- Engage in [self-care](#). Think about what you need and start by just

doing one thing for yourself.

- Recognize your signs of stress and find small ways to take a break, such as a short walk, listening to music, engaging in a 5-minute breathing exercise, or journaling.
- When coping with fears of the unknown, try to focus on what you can control. It might be helpful to get organized and make a plan, while allowing for flexibility if things don't go exactly as planned;
- Rely on your support system and accept help, whether just for an ear to listen or to run a quick errand. Know that you may not be able to do it all during this time, and that's ok.

Keep in mind that these strategies might be helpful, but are not a replacement for a [mental health](#) professional. If you or a loved one are experiencing symptoms of medical trauma, reach out to your doctor or a mental health professional for additional support.

Provided by University of Kentucky

Citation: Emotional medical trauma impacts caregivers of those with injuries and illness (2023, May 22) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-05-emotional-medical-trauma-impacts-caregivers.html>

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