

What is a Traumatic Incident?

A traumatic incident occurs when you witness or experience an event that is emotionally overwhelming. Typically, we can become overwhelmed if some or all of the following conditions are met::

- Perceived as life threatening
- Physical pain
- Lack of control over outcome
- Inability to respond
- Confusion
- Isolation
- Unpredictability
- Possibility of occurring again
- Repeated exposure
- Triggering fight/flight response

The more factors that are present during the event, the greater the chance it will be regarded as traumatic by the individual involved.

How does this impact the body?

When your brain perceives danger, it sends out the signals to reaction NOW. The brain releases a wave of chemicals to activate nerves to help the body gear up so you can fight or flee.

BREATHING speeds up to increase the oxygen to your body so it has the fuel to move...

HEARTRATE increases to move the oxygenated blood to your legs and feet for running, and your arms for fighting...

PAIN PERCEPTION is altered so you won't feel pain that would otherwise distract you from getting away

THINKING SPEED ramps up to increase your problem solving ability – which way to get out, what's behind you, etc. Between your brain and your sense organs (ears, nose, eyes) you can detect risk factors that you wouldn't have noticed under other circumstances.

SENSE OF TIME may become distorted because you are actually processing information in high speed – everything around you seems like it is happening in slow motion.

How long does this last?

The brain usually stops sending out the signals as soon as the danger is past, but the effects on the body can remain for hours to days and longer. The chemicals exit the body over time in 3 ways – 1) sweating them out, 2) crying them out, and 3) clearing them in the urine.

Repeated exposure to danger can result in the brain being drenched in stress hormones, leaving “chemical scars” - these can actually change how the brain works and may make permanent changes to the brain.

In extreme cases, the brain can no longer distinguish between past danger and current danger and begins to react as if it is ALL “DANGER NOW!”. This can show up as anxiety or panic attacks, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, and/or phobias.

And it's more than just chemistry...

The brain's job is to keep you alive and part of the way it does this is by storing memories to help you recognize and react faster in the future. Events, objects or individuals that are associated with a traumatic event are stored in memory. If it

reminds you in any way of the event, it is stored. These memories can link together in a chain – what you may react to is not the direct memory but to something associated with something associated with something associated with the memory.

What does this have to do with Chronic Pain?

Research is beginning to identify many ways that our brains can affect our bodies – and studies have linked chronic pain with mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, somatoform responses and substance abuse.

Specific studies have shown a connection between certain kinds of traumas and pain – including

- ▶ abuse trauma and chronic pain,
- ▶ “body memories” of trauma,
- ▶ altered brain function following trauma.

- If your body is in a constant state of alert, how can it NOT affect how your body feels?
- If you are fighting to forget or keep out memories that are painful and intrusive, it is a physical and emotional drain.
- If you have body problems and need to heal, you need ALL your resources, not just the ones that are available after you have tried to put painful memories out of your mind for the umpty-ninth time.
- The state of your brain also affects your immune system – reducing the stress on your immune system by de-stressing your mind can be a turning point for your body and its ability to heal itself.

Chronic Pain can also BECOME a Trauma, and can lead to increased risk for depression, anxiety and other mental health problems.

To Deal with the Trauma:

Traumatic Incident Reduction (TIR): a short-term, one-on-one, non-hypnotic, person-centered, highly structured, yet simple method for eliminating negative emotional effects of past traumas or emotionally charged memories.

What else do I need to know? One of the reasons that traditional methods of therapy may not work to resolve traumatic events is the fact that the session is not long enough to completely process the material that is explored. In a 50 minute session, the person opens the issue and then leaves the office before the issue is resolved. Research results suggest that this actually reactivates the trauma over and over and may increase the traumatic reaction instead of decreasing it.

In order to make sure this does not occur when doing TIR, sessions must be open ended – you finish when you have fully processed the material at hand. Typically a session may take from 1.5 to 3 hours. You and the facilitator will know when you are finished because you will reach an “End Point” signaled by one or more signs of emotional relief. The memory of the event will still be there but the emotional charge to that event will have been “unplugged” in that session and the memory will no longer have the power over you it once had.

TIR can remove the emotional charge from a memory of a specific event as well as from emotional themes that occur across different situations and don't seem to be the result of any one event.

**More information:
www.tira.org.**

Is there Unresolved Trauma?

- Nightmares or disturbing dreams
- Inability to sleep
- Startle easily or overly alert
- Intrusive thoughts or memories
- Unexpected emotional response to “normal situations”
- Avoidance of situations or people that are related to an event
- Become anxious and/or develop irrational fears
- Strong physical responses or “gut reactions” to situations - especially if you don't know why you are reacting
- Blanks in your memory for what you think is an important event
- Inability to see yourself in the future
- Irritability or outbursts of anger that don't make sense
- Problems concentrating
- Feeling detached or estranged from others
- Numbing of emotions, unable to have loving feelings
- Somatic problems, body complaints

Trauma & Chronic Pain

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