

# Defending Your Wellbeing After Trauma

Good afternoon. Welcome to defending your well being after trauma. Today's speaker is Alison Johnstone. She's a licensed clinical social worker and she's a substance abuse professional. Her background includes serving as a therapist and caseworker in hospitals and nonprofit organizations.

Alison brings a wealth of experience and expertise to her role as a senior EAP consultant here at Magellan on our workplace support team. So welcome, Alison. I'm going to turn it over to you now. Thank you for joining us.

>> ALISON JOHNSTONE: Thank you so much. Welcome to everybody for today's webinar. Our objectives today, we're going to define what trauma is, and then explain the different coping strategies to use after a traumatic event. And if time allows, I will go over some of the techniques if time allows, we will have a chance to practice one of the techniques.

So let's start with defining what's trauma.

So really what trauma is, when a terrible event happens or an unexpected event happens, it causes an emotional response. And that emotional response can then overwhelm your ability to cope with that.

What is most important that I want to emphasize is the trauma is unique to everybody. So there's no one size fits all, everybody has different responses, everybody what may be traumatic to one person may not be to another.

There's different reactions, there's different time frames, intensities of those reactions. And those can either manifest right away or sometimes they don't appear until later.

And trauma can have both short term and long term effects, and we'll go over that in a few minutes. Typically, what happens or a lot of times what happens is immediately after the event for a lot of people there's kind of a sense of shock or denial are fairly typical.

Longer term reactions can include things like flashbacks, relationship issues, physical symptoms, unpredictable or changed emotions.

And now we're going to talk a little bit about the types of trauma. And it can either be acute or chronic and complex trauma there is some overlap with chronic emotional trauma. But acute trauma usually results from a single, isolated event. But to be clear, so you're not confused about the terminology, there are short term effects from acute trauma.

There can also be long term effects. So even if it's a single, isolated event, it doesn't mean that everything is going to be short term.

Chronic trauma is really when you're exposed to repeated, prolonged, traumatic events. And also this can also lead to wide ranging and long term effect as well.

Complex trauma, and there is some overlap with chronic, emotional trauma, you're exposed to multiple traumatic events. And a lot of times these are very invasive, very interpersonal in nature.

So there is a little bit of overlap between chronic and complex trauma.

Next we're going to look at some of the and let me just give you some examples also, because there's all different types of trauma. So I'm just going to name some of these.

There can be child abuse and neglect, bullying, community violence, it might be because of a natural disaster or traumatic grief that can happen. Interpersonal, intergenerational trauma. So there's all different kinds of traumas. And as I said before, everybody reacts differently so there's no one set of specific guidelines that everybody's going to react in a similar fashion.

It can certainly impact your well being, so there's three areas we're going to look at. Emotional, physical, and then behavioral.

So emotional trauma are really intense feelings, you could be feeling very afraid, very sad, maybe you have difficulty concentrating. There could be numbness, there can be anger. And sometimes, and not always, some of those emotions can then lead to anxiety, depression, maybe post traumatic stress disorder. Not always, but sometimes.

Physical health can manifest in a large number of ways. You can have headaches, fatigue, insomnia, or maybe you're sleeping more than normal. That can happen as well.

Difficulty concentrating and focusing. Feeling startled or jumpy. A racing heartbeat, things like that, and sometimes it can lead to a weakened immune system because of chronic stress. Those are some of the examples of physical effects.

Behavioral effects are things like maybe you start to withdraw from social events or from people in your life or from maybe where it happened. If you were there directly. You may have difficulty, again, focusing. Or you may turn to unhealthy addictions such as substance abuse or other types of addiction. Those are the three general areas on how it can impact your well being.

And there are some coping techniques that there's actually several different areas, so I'm going to go over each of these and kind of describe them a little bit for you, what kind of things you can do. And again, you know, what you choose to do that's unique and individual.

So the first one is called rhythmic movement, and that's really all about any kind of body movement. So this goes back to very ancient times it was considered a common movement. Like if you pick up a crying child to comfort them.

And past ancestors often used movement to not only calm their children, but also themselves. And so any kind of movement that you can do, whether it's dancing or drumming, moving together in circles or moving by yourself. And some people say it's just a natural way to kind of self sooth.

You don't have to be, you know, a great dancer or anything like that, or have any sense of rhythm, you just need to allow your body to lead you as you follow. Dancing I mentioned. You can throw a ball. Throw it up in the air to yourself or to somebody else. Maybe playing a musical instrument. Or create some kind of a beat with your hand or your body. Rocking or swaying can be also very, very effective. Anything that kind of feels common to you would be an example of rhythmic movement.

Now, open posture, now you've probably come across people, just to give you a comparison, if you see somebody who's got a clenched and they've got their arms crossed and they look really withdrawn, that's a really closed type posture.

An open posture is really where your body is kind of unprotected, so your shoulders may be pulled back, your head may be up. Your arms are uncrossed, your hands are unclasped, and there's no kind of large objects that are in front of you.

And engaging in this kind of open posture can increase feelings of safety, and that can actually neutralize a lot of the stress from the trauma.

And really what you're telling yourself when you're using these kind of more open postures is what you're telling yourself and your body is I'm safe in this moment.

Sensory grounding is another technique that you can use, and that's where you're using all five of your senses. So sight, sound, touch, smell, and taste. And it really helps to connect you to the present moment, because when you're in a traumatic event, it's really more important to focus on that present moment rather than what happened in the past or worrying about what may or may not happen in the future.

So some of the examples of this, like for sight, you could focus on maybe an object or your immediate surroundings and notice all of the details. One way to do this is you can take a walk out in nature or around your neighborhood and really just notice the beautiful things that are around you. Kind of try to stay focused in that in that moment.

Or you could pick five objects and you look at each one of them for a few seconds and turn, you know, how many things I can see, what colors are there, that kind of thing.

Sound is also a good way to cope. And sometimes it's just a case of just stopping where you're at, whether you're at home, whether you're outside or in the office, and just noticing how many different sounds can you pick out.

Sometimes you have to be patient. It might take a few moments for background sounds that we get used to to become noticeable. Certainly you can listen to music and maybe try to isolate the instruments that you hear and listen to them separately.

Smell is also a good technique. You know, try to identify every scent that you can. And yeah, or touching something. Something like that, where you can feel the ground below your feet or the chair beneath you. Notice how it feels to be supported. You can push your feet into the floor or grab tightly on to your chair.

And pay attention to the details. So whether you're touching or smelling, listening to something, it's really in those fine details. Kind of focus on that.

Smell is also very powerful, as I mentioned. We can smell what's in your environment or if you're eating something, kind of focus on that. You can drink something, maybe warm or cold. And recognize how it feels in your mouth or down really kind of savor the experience for that.

So that is another technique.

Another one is muscle relaxation. And that's where you're trying to tense up your muscles for a period of time. For example, there's one exercise that you may tense them for ten seconds and then you might let go for 20 or 30 seconds.

But when you're letting go, the key is trying not to move that muscle group for 20 to 30 seconds. And you can repeat that as often as you need to do that.

What I'd like to do, there is something called deep breathing that really comes from your diaphragm. So I thought maybe we can try this for a few minutes, and I'll kind of do it with you so you can kind of get the feel for it. It's pretty short. It's pretty easy to do.

What you want to do is try to make yourself as comfortable as possible. Now the secret in this, you don't want to be breathing from your chest or your shoulders, it's really about stomach on belly breathing. Sometimes it helps if you put you can put a hand on your stomach or on your chest. And what should happen is as you breathe in, your stomach will expand. And as you breathe out, it will contract.

So if you put your hands there, you'll be able to notice that. So we're just going to try this for a few seconds. So everybody just close your eyes and go ahead and take a breath for a count of four. And then what you want to do is try to hold it for a count of seven or as long as you can. And then as you breath out, try to make it longer than your inhale. So you may want to try to breathe for a count of eight.

And just kind of settle into the moment. And let's try that one more time. Breathe in for a count of four. Hold it for a count of seven, or as long as you can. And then slowly breathe out for a count of seven, eight, or nine. Okay.

And then you can you can also note with this technique how you feel before and how you feel after. But it's probably one it's one of the more easier ones. It's very, very effective. There's all kinds of breathing techniques, that's just one of them. But certainly try that as well as the muscle relaxation.

Okay. And again, breathing is very, very important. Most of us kind of go around and we've got shallow breathing and sometimes we don't notice that we're doing that. And when you're in trauma, when you're experiencing trauma and you're experiencing those emotions, your breath can kind of get shallow. And the key is really to just kind of stop and focus on your breathing and just do that technique where you breathe in slowly and then breathe out.

And it only needs to take a few minutes, it doesn't have to be lengthy, and for a lot of people they find that very, very helpful. It can be very calming and soothing.

Okay. Now there's also some other tips when it comes to defending your well being. When I consider defending your well being, it's really about recognizing that it's okay to feel what you feel after a trauma. There's no right or wrong way to feel, that's perfectly normal, whatever emotion you feel. And it's really giving yourself permission to be able to to own that feeling, but also giving yourself permission to self sooth and take care of yourself and because that's going to be really, really key to recovery.

So I'm just going to go over a few of these. The first one is don't isolate. You know, reach out to friends and family if you can. If they're supportive or maybe reach out to others that have had a similar experience to talk to. Because they might be having some of the same feelings that you are.

But try to open the lines of communication as soon as possible after the event, because that will be an important part of your recovery. You can also join a support group in your community. Sometimes talking things over with others that had the same experience, maybe they're still going with it or haven't recovered from it, maybe they can give you tips on how to deal with what's happening.

You know, your doctor, mental health expert can kind of point you to some groups or you can find them online.

The next tip is the face it rather than avoid it. So when you've had a traumatic event happen, for a lot of people what you want to do or what most people feel, I just want to avoid it. I don't want to feel. I don't want to think about it. I kind of want to push it away.

But as tempting as that is, it's such a key ingredient in recovery to learn to be okay with your memories of it and the things that trigger them without trying to avoid them. Because facing your feelings head on is important, because you want to be able to take care of them in a way that helps you move forward.

The next one is listen to your body. So your body and your mind will kind of tell you or try to communicate what to do to heal. So things like eating healthy meals, resting when you get a chance, do things that make you happy. Maybe take a bath. Try to get a regular sleep schedule, is going to bed at the same time and getting up at the same time will help get that rhythm more in sync.

You can make sure the room is cool and quiet and dark. You can read. Now, what I kind of recommend, because a lot of people want to read in bed, and that's okay, but I think sometimes it's better not to do that. If you read in bed, then your mind kind of gets the idea that that's what you do in bed as far as sleeping.

So if you do want to read you may want to do it out of the bed.

You know, you can go for a walk or get together, you know, go to a play, whatever it is that makes you feel good and really treat yourself is what's going to be key.

Stay away from substances. So people will sometimes drink alcohol, maybe take drugs to kind of take the edge off as they're going through a stress. But what that really does is just kind of numbs things. And it may feel like it's working in the short term, but it really can do damage over the long run.

The problem is, is if the stress continues, the alcohol or drug use or other substance use can continue as well. And that can lead to mental and physical problems and long term dependence.

Getting back into a normal routine as much as possible is important. Because it can be interrupted. When you have a trauma it can be very, very interrupted because you're so focused on that trauma that that's what you can see. And then your routine starts getting getting changed.

So the goal for those trying to get past the stress of trauma is to return to that day to day schedule as soon as possible. Getting your groove back can help you reestablish a sense of normalcy and regain a sense of control over your life.

And fix the little things. So take time to resolve small conflicts in your life so they don't build up and add stress. If you have large tasks, you can break them down into little ones. Maybe set some priorities and tackle them when you can.

And taking those off your list will let you focus on the bigger battles.

And the last one is to celebrate life. Because sometimes what happens when people are going through trauma and they're feeling all kinds of emotion, and then they start to feel a little bit happy. And for some people, that can bring on some guilt feelings. Why should I be feeling happy, I've had this terrible thing happened or that I've witnessed.

But it's okay. It's important to understand it's okay to feel joy. It's okay to celebrate successes. Revel in the work for your family and friends, even after a traumatic event. That's all part of the road to recovery.

The other thing I want to mention that I didn't mention before when it comes to trauma, so most people think of trauma as something where it's directly impacting you or you were directly there. There is something also called secondary trauma, and sometimes secondary trauma, a lot of times it's related to things like natural disasters or some violence or something that happens where you may not have been directly there to witness it, but you're seeing it in the media or you're, you know, people are talking to you about it.

So you can have kind of secondary trauma. But all of these techniques will help with that as well. So those are just some of the techniques and the things to think about down this recovery road.

And you know, be patient with yourself too, because if you're trying some of these techniques and you're like, oh, it's really not working, it's okay. Just be patient and give it some time. And don't beat yourself up if say you've scheduled some time. Because that's what I try to tell people too, is try to schedule that time.

But if something else comes up that you need to take care of and you don't get a chance to do it, you know, don't beat yourself up by saying I should have done that. It's okay sometimes to miss things. You know, you can pick it up at a later date.

So just an overall summary, as I mentioned, trauma is unique. Not everybody is going to feel it the same way or on the same time frame.

It can certainly have an impact on somebody's well being. And it's important to recognize and take care of that. And help is always available for you.

And this is kind of a question to kind of ponder today, and I'd encourage you to kind of think about this today and maybe write it down is how will you defend your well being?

>> AMY D'AMICO: Thank you, Alison. I did put this up on our screen as a poll question. How will you defend your well being? I'm seeing some awesome answers here. It looks like folks learned from you, Alison, so I love that.

>> ALISON JOHNSTONE: There are good ones, take ownership of my part, prayer and meditation. Give yourself grace, I love that one too. Make the time, that's so important. Setting boundaries, self care, and being okay. Giving yourself permission to feel what you feel and know that that's okay. That that's not anything to be ashamed of. It's okay to feel to feel what you feel. And it's okay to feel sad or depressed sometimes, but you've got, you know, coping techniques that you can use.

Talking with others, you know, can certainly, you know, help as well. Setting boundaries with people. So sometimes it's hard for people to understand that, you know, you want to take some time for yourself and it's okay to do that and you just say, you know, this is what I need to do right now for me. So really wonderful, great answers.

>> AMY D'AMICO: I just saw one that said snuggle my dog more. I love that.

>> ALISON JOHNSTONE: I love that too. Pets can certainly be a comfort.

>> AMY D'AMICO: All right. Thank you, Alison. I'm going to go ahead and change that poll and move that out of the way and I just want to thank you again, Alison. This was a fantastic presentation. And we are going to have some time for questions. But before we get to that, I just want to remind everyone that your program is here to help you. We're available to see you and your family members, if you do want more information on this topic or any other health and wellness topic, please reach out to Magellan. Your program is here to help you. We can help you to be aware of just how you're doing, how you can improve the areas of your life.

We want you to thrive. So you can contact your program day or night. We are here 365 days a year. If you are having a moment of crisis at, you know, 11:30 on New Year's Eve, reach out, there will be somebody here to talk to you. Any time.

You can call your toll free number or you can visit the member website online. And actually I'm going to put that in our Q&A pod so that you can maybe I am. No, Melanie just put it in actually. Thank you.

So yeah, if you don't know your company's specific phone number or you don't know the website, you can click on that link that Mel just put in the chat for us, and that will let you search for your company.

You may have to search for a parent company, so like your overall organization, not just the company that you specifically work for. But yes, please reach out. If you're not sure, still, how to contact us, you can reach out to your HR department for help too.

So we do have some time for questions. Alison, I've got a couple here for you. I don't know if you want to say anything before we get to those or

>> ALISON JOHNSTONE: No, go ahead, that's fine.

>> AMY D'AMICO: The first question was I am so busy and don't have time do any of these coping techniques. What can I do instead?

>> ALISON JOHNSTONE: That's understandable. We live in a busy, hectic world. That's why it's important to you almost have to schedule that time and give yourself time to schedule the time. And you really need to figure out what's going to work best for you. For example, for myself, I can set

aside a few minutes in the morning before I go to work or for some people maybe at bedtime or at lunch.

But kind of scheduling a time, because you know, most people can fit in it doesn't even have to be long. These techniques can be as short as five minutes if you're doing some kind of breathing or something like that.

But that's what I always try to advise is try to schedule the time. But as I said before, don't feel like, okay, I schedule this at Tuesday at noon, but I couldn't do it this Tuesday at noon because something came up with my child. So it's okay to miss that.

But I think it's just acknowledging that it doesn't have to be a lengthy coping strategy, it can be just a few minutes even if it's just taking, you know, a few breaths.

>> AMY D'AMICO: Thank you, Alison. I think it's so important to really carve out that time to yourself, even if you're just, you know, on your way to or from somewhere and you're in the car and just taking that time to, you know, focus on what's around you. Feel the car seat under your body, you know, feel, you know, the seatbelt is there protecting you. Look at the trees, the sunshine. I think there's so many things that you can do when you may feel like you don't have the time. But you really do.

I love it topic and I love that there's so many ways you can cope.

So we have another question, somebody commented that I am afraid if I do try to do these things people will think I'm selfish and then I will feel guilty for taking that time for me.

Do you have any advice?

>> ALISON JOHNSTONE: It's really the word selfish. So for most people if you say oh, well, they're going to think I'm selfish, selfish is kind of a strange word because for a lot of people to them what it means is selfish, you know, is what other people think. So other people are going to think it's selfish.

But selfish in this kind of self care thing is really all about self care. I associate it's not being selfish, it's being selfish in a self caring kind of way.

What I try to tell people is don't be so concerned about what other people may think. Being selfish is not a problem. It's not in terms of well, if I do this am I neglecting anybody else. Selfish is really self care, taking care of yourself.

>> AMY D'AMICO: Thank you. I agree, Alison.

Another question says what if I feel like I'm not making enough progress or if I just can't seem to do one of the coping techniques right?

>> ALISON JOHNSTONE: So again, it's really important to be patient with yourself. If you're trying to do a technique and any time you're starting something new that you haven't done before, sometimes people feel that they have to do it just right. But you just have to be patient with yourself. And if it really feels like something's not working, you've tried it a few times or it just doesn't seem to fit, it just doesn't feel right to you, it's okay to try to switch to something else.



And if you're doing one of the techniques I didn't mention, though, in this, was meditation. I'll just give an example. Some people think I can't sit there for 30 minutes. And meditation doesn't have to be that long. It can be five minutes. But even if that, you feel like hey, you know, this really doesn't seem to be helping. I've tried it, you know, for a while. It's okay. You just have to experiment and try different things. Because everybody's different.

>> AMY D'AMICO: Yeah, thank you. All right. Looks like we have time for maybe one more question. So one that came up says where can we find information on trauma support groups and are there any available through Magellan?

And I know as far as I know, I don't think that we have any directly through Magellan. But we do have resources available on the member website. So again, you know, just go and check that out.

And Alison, I don't know if you know of any other or if you have any suggestions on where else folks could find support groups.

>> ALISON JOHNSTONE: There is a Magellan website, there's that section on community resources. Some people will call places like United Way. I think it's the Mental Health Alliance, those kinds of organizations would have support groups. Or if it's a particular trauma that you're experiencing, say it's, you know, abuse or something or domestic violence or something like that, a lot of times you can find there's organizations specifically designed for that. So you can kind of search for domestic violence support groups and that will pull up some information specific to the trauma you're experiencing.

>> AMY D'AMICO: Thank you.

I know there's tons of resources out there, it's just sometimes you got to dig a little bit to find it. And ask around too. You never know who else may have gone through a similar situation or a friend of a friend went through it and they can point you in the right direction.

I think let's do one more question. A question about, you know, is there a time when it's too soon to start processing your trauma? Should you wait until you feel like you're really ready or should you dive in and address it immediately?

>> ALISON JOHNSTONE: I think that's really dependent on the person's individual kind of makeup. I think there's some merit, though, to wait a little bit. I mean, initially for a lot of people you're kind of dealing with the immediate shock and not really being able to process emotions well.

So I think in some cases it's better to wait a little bit rather than try to do it too soon.

But if you feel like you're ready, if you feel that you can, you know, do that, it's perfectly okay to do that. But I think for some people, initially it may not be as effective because you're still kind of dealing with the immediate aftereffects of that trauma.

>> AMY D'AMICO: Thank you, Alison. All right. It looks like we are almost done with our time today. So I'm actually we pulled up a short survey, if our participants wouldn't mind filling that out. Just rating your overall satisfaction for today's session.

There's also a section for feedback. You can leave any comments in there. And then Mel also put together a list of some resources and added those to our to our handout. I guess it's a handout, I

can't tell. But you can click on those links and it can take you to different resources that are available. There's a couple different coping techniques, there's a link to muscle relaxation, different breathing techniques, mindfulness exercise, and also a link for the national center for PTSD.

So those are really great resources. And then also this is brought you to by your EAP and you can click on that and find out more information on the resources available through Magellan.

There is also a certificate of completion that can be downloaded in the downloads section. I just want to say thank you again to Alison. This was a fantastic session. Very valuable. I hope that all of our participants found it valuable as well. It looked like it. We're getting a lot of good feedback, so loved it.

But thank you so much, everyone. This does conclude our session for today. Have a great rest of the week, great rest of the year!

(Session ended at 2:42 p.m. ET)

This text, document, or file is based on live transcription. Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART), captioning, and/or live transcription are provided in order to facilitate communication accessibility and may not be a totally verbatim record of the proceedings. This text, document, or file is not to be distributed or used in any way that may violate copyright law.