



UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA SYMPTOMS IN RELATIONSHIPS

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INTRODUCTION

When one or both partners have experienced trauma, the effects can show up not only in personal thoughts and feelings but also in how you relate to each other. Trauma is not just an individual problem—it's something that affects the relationship system.

The goal is to help you recognize trauma-related patterns you may notice in yourself or your partner. These are not signs of weakness, character flaws, or rejection—they are symptoms of the body and mind trying to stay safe after trauma.

By learning to see these reactions as symptoms rather than personal attacks, character flaws, or rejection, you can:

- Develop compassion for yourself and your partner.
- Understand that trauma responses are automatic, not intentional.
- Begin to communicate about what's happening, instead of withdrawing or blaming.
- Work together as a team to replace avoidance and disconnection with shared safety and closeness.

TRAUMA SYMPTOMS



These are symptoms you might notice in each other.

Re-experiencing or Intrusive Symptoms

These are reminders of the trauma that intrude unexpectedly into the present.

You might notice your partner:

- Gets startled or distressed by sights, sounds, or smells that resemble the trauma.
- Has nightmares or wakes up upset.
- Appears “far away,” lost in thought, or suddenly emotional.
- Reacts with strong physical tension (heart racing, sweating) when reminded of something painful.

Avoidance Symptoms

Avoidance is a way to protect oneself from distress, but it can create emotional distance.

You might notice your partner:

- Avoids talking about what happened or changes the subject.
- Withdraws from places or activities that used to be meaningful.
- Becomes absorbed in work, screens, or busyness.
- Shuts down emotionally or physically when things get serious.

TRAUMA SYMPTOMS

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Negative Changes in Thinking and Mood

These symptoms often influence closeness and connection.

You might notice your partner:

- Expresses guilt, shame, or self-blame (“It was my fault,” “You’d be better off without me”).
- Seems numb or detached even during good moments.
- Loses interest in sex, hobbies, or friendships.
- Has a hard time feeling joy, affection, or hope.
- Talks as if the world or people are unsafe or untrustworthy.

Hyperarousal and Reactivity

These symptoms reflect the body’s alarm system staying on high alert.

You might notice your partner:

- Startles easily or constantly scans the environment.
- Has trouble falling or staying asleep.
- Becomes irritable, angry, or impatient over small things.
- Has difficulty concentrating or relaxing.

TRAUMA SYMPTOMS

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Relationship-Level Effects

PTSD symptoms don't stay contained—they ripple into the relationship.

You might notice patterns such as:

- Emotional or physical withdrawal.
- Arguments that escalate quickly.
- Feeling like you have to “walk on eggshells.”
- Avoidance of closeness out of fear of being hurt or rejected.
- Overprotectiveness or control driven by anxiety about safety.

Next Step

Take a few minutes together to identify:

1. Which of these symptoms you've each noticed.
2. How they affect your relationship.
3. One small way you could respond with compassion instead of frustration.