

# Trauma and PTSD in Chronic Illness

By **Lisa Harder, BA, MA, Registered Psychologist**

## What is trauma?

While the word trauma is often widely used, people may use it to describe different things or as a bit of a catch-all.

The [American Psychological Association](#) (2026) defines trauma as follows:

“1. Any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, dissociation, confusion, or other disruptive feelings intense enough to have a long-lasting negative effect on a person’s attitudes, behavior, and other aspects of functioning.

Traumatic events include those caused by human behavior (e.g. assault, war, industrial accidents) as well as by nature (e.g., earthquakes) and often challenge an individual’s view of the world as a just, safe, and predictable place.”

“2. Any serious physical injury, such as a widespread burn or a blow to the head.”

So, while we can experience distress and distressing events, it doesn’t necessarily mean we will experience trauma.

## What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?

[Posttraumatic Stress Disorder](#) (PTSD) is

“a psychiatric condition that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event or series of traumatic events. The individual often experiences the event or events as emotionally or physically harmful or life-threatening. Examples include, but are not limited to, abuse (physical, sexual, emotional), natural disasters, serious accidents, terrorist acts, war/combat exposure, intimate partner violence, and medical illness.

However, most individuals who experience traumas do not go on to develop PTSD...symptoms must last for more than a month and must cause significant distress or problems in the individual's daily functioning...

PTSD often occurs with other related conditions, such as depression, substance use, memory problems and other physical and mental health problems”.



PULMONARY HYPERTENSION  
ASSOCIATION OF CANADA  
L'ASSOCIATION D'HYPERTENSION  
PULMONAIRE DU CANADA

[www.phacanada.ca](http://www.phacanada.ca)

[info@phacanada.ca](mailto:info@phacanada.ca) | 1-877-774-2226

A better life for all Canadians affected by pulmonary hypertension

Last reviewed: 2026

## PTSD and chronic illness

When we live with chronic illness, like pulmonary hypertension, we may experience major health events that are life-threatening. As a result, we can develop PTSD or trauma-related symptoms which can impact our daily lives significantly:

- Flashbacks, nightmares, and/or intrusive memories
- Avoidance of people, places, activities, objects, or situations connected to the traumatic event or avoidance of talking about it altogether
- Difficulties with memory, concentration, and thinking
- Derealization or depersonalization
- Feeling isolated from others
- Mood changes
- Negative beliefs about oneself
- Difficulties in navigating relationships with others
- Difficulty managing emotions
- Irritability
- Easily startled or on edge (hypervigilant)
- Difficulty sleeping

These symptoms can overlap with other mental health concerns, so for further evaluation and discussion, it is important to speak with a mental health or medical professional trained in assessment and diagnosis.

## Coping strategies

If you experience flashbacks, nightmares, or intrusive memories, grounding strategies can be helpful for regulating emotions and bringing our focus back to the present:

- [5-4-3-2-1](#)
- [Butterfly Hug](#)
- [Grounding with Senses and Mind](#)

Speak to a therapist or counsellor for ongoing support who is trained in working with trauma and chronic illness.

Medication may be helpful as a part of a larger treatment strategy, depending on what your symptoms are. Please consult a psychiatrist or other medical professional trained in prescribing mental health medications.

Be kind to yourself. Trauma-related symptoms are not due to any kind of failure on your part. They occur as a way of our body trying to alert ourselves to potential danger or threat.

