

What is Trauma

Our brains are continually processing our experiences (which is what helps us to make sense of reality) and turning our experiences into memories.

When we experience a trauma (something that is too overwhelming for the brain to process at the time), instead of forming specific memories of the full event (or events), we can remember images, sights, sounds, and physical sensations without much context.

A traumatic memory is encoded without context and stored in implicit memory (in the body). Certain visual scenes, sounds, smells or physical sensations can therefore **trigger** a re-experiencing of part or all of the traumatic memory and induce strong physical and emotional reactions.

What is PTSD

PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) is an anxiety disorder that can develop after a traumatic event (or events).

Complex PTSD refers to the effects of repeated experiences of traumatic situations, experienced during childhood or adulthood. The symptoms are often more severe and persistent.

Symptoms of PTSD can include:

Flashbacks - remembering aspects of the event.

Avoidance and numbing symptoms - eg. feeling that you've left your body/dissociated or withdrawing from daily life/certain situations.

Arousal symptoms - e.g anxiety, hyper-vigilance, difficulty concentrating, irritability, angry outbursts, muscle tension.

Difficulty regulating emotions (more common with complex PTSD)

Difficulty forming or maintaining close relationships (more common with complex PTSD)

Sleep disorders, eating disorders, somatic issues.

Drug and alcohol misuse.

Having strong negative beliefs about yourself or strong negative feelings such as guilt or shame.

Excessive worrying about the future, feelings of hopelessness, depression.

How to manage the symptoms of PTSD

If you are experiencing a strong physical or emotional reaction or having intrusive thoughts and you are **not in a stressful, distressing or dangerous situation in the present moment**, your feelings and thoughts may relate to the traumatic memory that happened in the past. and is now over. Learn to recognise when you are being triggered and use the resources (see below) to re-establish a sense of safety, and inner calm in the here and now.

Internal resources are self-care practices that can help you change how you are feeling or responding in the present moment. These might include:

- breathing practices
- mindfulness practices
- grounding exercises
- visualisations
- physical exercise
- connect to your creativity through music, dance, poetry, writing, visual arts, sewing, cooking.

External resources are the tools that you can call upon from others and your environment. These might include:

- working with a therapist who is experienced in working with trauma
- talking with a friend you trust
- spending time with a pet
- taking a class, joining a gym
- creating pleasant sensory experiences in your home (scents, candles, soft blankets or furnishings, soft pastel colours)
- bodywork (massage, rolfing)
- connecting to nature - walk in parks, tend to house plants, tend to a garden.

Track your arousal levels

Print the next page and tracking your arousal levels over a 3 day period. Notice fluctuations and see if you can identify the thoughts, emotions, people, activities or situations that influenced your arousal. Write these down at the bottom of the page. What resources would help you regulate your arousal state (stay in a calm, focused, competent, energized and engaged state)?

Identifying and anticipating what moves you out of an optimal zone means that you are better equipped to use resources at an opportune time, before you move into a hyper or hypo arousal.

Below is a small selection of resources that can help manage symptoms. It is better to integrate into daily life or use them when you notice you **begin** to feel dysregulated rather than waiting until you are already in a fight, flight or freeze state.

CHANGE YOUR BODY REACTION: Forget the story of what happened and take your awareness directly to the body. Notice sensations and feelings with curiosity and without judgment. Use slow breathing with an even rhythm (or making your exhale slightly longer than your inhale) and progressive muscle relaxation to help relieve tension in the body and reduce anxiety. Integrate relaxation techniques into daily life (meditation, deep slow breathing, massage, or restorative/yin yoga).

COME INTO THE PRESENT MOMENT: by concentrating and focusing on your immediate environment. Use all your senses: What do you see, hear, smell? Touch objects around you and describe them to yourself (texture, colour, smell, weight). As you direct and hold your attention to the here and now, acknowledge that the trauma that happened is in the past and over. In the here and now you are safe.

USE YOUR BODY TO GROUND: Stand barefoot and shift your weight slowly and mindfully from left foot to right foot to left foot to right foot, whilst keeping both feet firmly rooted to the floor. Notice the sensations across the whole of each foot as you do this. Then move your awareness up through the legs, torso and towards the head as you continue shifting or rocking from left to right, side to side. Come to a centred ground position, with your body weight evenly distributed between both feet and connect the whole of your body. Stand tall. Notice sensations through your whole body. Notice your breathing.

Stimulate your vagus nerve.

Splash cold water on your face.

Activate your prefrontal cortex

Name all the different types of animals you can think of (e.g., zebra, cat, dog, cow, etc...), or types of flowers, cities, etc... Say the alphabet backwards. Learn and recite a poem or learn and sing a song.

CALM BREATHING AND FOLLOWING YOUR BREATH

You can use a **counting method**, using the natural rhythm of your breath:

Count (say to yourself inwardly) 1 then breathe in and breathe out, count 2 then breathe in and breathe out, count 3 then breathe in and breathe out. Continue all the way to 10. If you get lost, simply start at 1 again. Once you've done this Breathe in and breathe out and then count 1, breathe in/breathe out count 2, breathe in/ breathe out count 3. . . .continue to 10. When you have finished counting simply continue breathing and notice the spaces between in breath and out breath and the space after each out breath.

You can also use an **affirmation**: Breath in (right now I am safe) breath out (right now I am relaxing my ... "tight shoulders, the tension in my face etc. . .) Work progressively through parts of body that are tense.

SELF TALK – actively talk yourself through:

- *I'm okay and safe in this situation.*
- *I am experiencing a feeling flashback/body memory and right now I am safe.*
- *My thoughts and emotions cannot harm me. I can breathe through them and bring all my attention to what I am doing in the present moment until they gradually fade.*