
Coping with stress, trauma, & posttraumatic stress

A self-directed learning course for people affected by crisis or disaster

This course is for you if:

- You have been in distressing situations where you may have felt trapped, out of control, or helpless
 - Important parts of your life are still affected by those events, like your mood, relationships, or work
 - You have felt alone in these feelings or wondered if others have felt the same
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Navigating this course:

- This course is divided into eight main lessons.
 - You can take these lessons in order — or focus on the one(s) that seem most relevant to your experience.
 - Each lesson includes information and activities to help you understand its topic.
 - You can listen to the information using our audio player and/or download a PDF to save or print for emergency use.
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1. Introduction to trauma, PTSD, and stigma

This page is for you if:

- You've been in a distressing situation or situations where you might have felt trapped, out of control, or helpless
- Important parts of your life are still affected by that event or events, such as your mood, relationships, and/or work
- You've felt alone in these feelings and/or wondered if others have felt the same

What is trauma?

Psychological trauma refers to the emotional consequences of living through a highly stressful situation or traumatic event.

There is no strict definition for traumatic events, but they're usually situations in which you experience strong feelings of distress, fear, loss of control, or being trapped.

Traumatic events can be:

- Things that happen to you.
- Things you see and/or hear happen to someone else.

They can be one-time events (like an assault) or long-term patterns (like abuse or repeated exposure to danger).

What are the consequences of trauma?

Psychological trauma is just like physical injury: it can result in symptoms that vary in severity, intensity, and duration.

Emotional symptoms	Physical symptoms	Cognitive symptoms	Behavioural symptoms
Numbness and/or detachment	Fatigue and/or exhaustion	Difficulty concentrating and/or making decisions	Social withdrawal
Fear and/or anxiety	Nausea, digestive problems, or changes in appetite	Intrusive thoughts and/or memories relating to trauma	Disengagement from your typical responsibilities and activities
Guilt and/or shame	Difficulty sleeping	Changes in the way you think about yourself, others, and/or the world	Increase in unhelpful coping strategies, such as avoidance and alcohol or substance use
Anger and/or irritability	Increased heart rate, startle response, and/or feeling "on edge"	Difficulty trusting yourself and/or others	
Sadness and/or hopelessness			
Difficulty experiencing positive emotions	Increased muscle tension		

Although these symptoms can be hard to live with, they are normal responses to traumatic events. When you have a physical injury like a broken ankle, you notice the bruising, swelling, and pain. These indicators, while unpleasant, signal that your body has begun to heal.

Recovering from psychological trauma takes time and effort. When the nature of a traumatic event is particularly severe or long lasting, your symptoms may take longer to heal. You may develop a posttraumatic stress injury (PTSI).

What is PTSD?

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a diagnosable mental health condition that may develop in those who have experienced a traumatic event or events.

Not everyone who goes through trauma will develop PTSD, and there's no way to know for certain who will. However, these factors can make you more vulnerable:

- The traumatic event included a threat to your safety
- You experienced intense helplessness and/or fear during the event
- You have feelings of guilt, shame, or responsibility about the event and/or its outcomes
- More stressful experiences followed the original event
- You received inadequate social support after the event

Many people who live through trauma go on to experience posttraumatic stress. You may never get a diagnosis of PTSD. You may continue to function from day to day while enduring some or all of these symptoms:

- Nightmares, flashbacks, and/or intrusive memories
- Feeling unable to connect with yourself, others, and/or the world around you
- Feeling unable to have positive emotions like joy, pleasure, and/or love
- High irritability and/or angry outbursts
- Increased tension, fear, and/or hypervigilance
- Anxiety and/or worry about your future

A note about terms: We use the term posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to refer to the diagnosable mental health condition. We use the term posttraumatic stress injury (PTSI) to refer to the psychological hurt you may experience after a traumatic event.

The impact of stigma

Stigma refers to a societal disapproval or misunderstanding. It can include shaming and/or blaming people who live with a mental illness.

Stigma can be harmful to someone who has experienced trauma, with impacts including:

- Feelings of fear or shame

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- Withdrawal and/or hiding from support systems
 - Attempts to suppress, ignore, or avoid painful symptoms

Activities

Share your stress with a loved one

It can be hard to bear the weight of your stress on your own. Ask a loved one to take time to listen without having to offer advice or try to solve your problems for you.

Identify your triggers

Make a list of the people, places, situations, and/or memories that you struggle to cope with. This list might include a person who reminds you of someone you've lost or a location where your stress gets agitated.

Writing prompts

Letter to a loved one

Write a letter to a loved one (which you may or may not send) about the traumatic event you experienced and how it has impacted you since.

Next, pretend you are the person receiving that letter and write a reply to yourself. Respond how you would if someone you love had been through the event instead of you.

Listing

Write down the unhelpful thoughts you've had about yourself since the traumatic event. Next, for each item on the list, write one or two pieces of counter evidence. For example, if one of your unhelpful thoughts is "I'm not good enough," then write down two ways or times when you've felt useful or important to counter it.

2. The impact of trauma on mood and emotions

This page is for you if:

- You've noticed it is hard to let go of negative emotions, leading to a persistent low mood
- You're stuck in cycles of negative thinking that lead to feelings of hopelessness, guilt, or blame
- You find it hard to control fear-based feelings like stress and anxiety and would rather focus on the emotions that keep you calm and relaxed

What is mood?

Mood is a temporary state of mind, or simply how you feel in a given moment.

Moods can feel good, bad, or neutral. They are generally more stable and less intense than emotions. Those tend to be stronger, more specific, and shorter in duration.

Working together, your moods and emotions have a profound impact across your life.

Your moods can influence:

- How you think, feel, and behave
- Your interest in daily activities
- How you develop and maintain relationships
- How you make decisions
- How you view the world (e.g., positively or negatively)

Trauma, posttraumatic stress injury, and emotions

Several negative emotions are associated with stress, trauma, and PTSI. They include:

- Fear and/or anxiety
- Sadness and/or depression

- Irritability and/or anger
- Guilt and/or shame
- Hopelessness

These emotions can feel overwhelming, especially after an experience of significant stress or trauma. They can lead to unhelpful changes in your thinking, as well as negative feelings that can impact you, your environment, and others around you.

Negative emotions	Unhelpful changes in thinking	Examples
Guilt or shame	Negative self-talk or doubt	"I am stupid" and/or "I cannot do anything right"
	Distorted blame	Blaming yourself for things you can't control
Fear or anger	Difficulty trusting others	Not believing your colleagues, authority figures, or loved ones
	Detachment from or disinterest in others	Difficulty relating to your colleagues, authority figures, or loved ones
	Difficulty managing negative emotions	Unwanted feelings of fear, anger, horror, etc.
Sadness or hopelessness	Exaggerated negative expectations of yourself or the world	"I will never be happy again" and/or "The world is unsafe"
	Decreased participation in activities	Low energy levels and/or motivation. Loss of pleasure in activities you previously enjoyed

Negative emotions	Unhelpful changes in thinking	Examples
	Difficulty experiencing positive emotions	Reduced ability to feel love and happiness leads to feelings of guilt and shame instead

PTSD and depression

PTSD and depression often happen at the same time because of the impacts that stress and trauma can have on mood.

Everyone has low moods or periods of “feeling blue” from time to time. However, depression is more intense and lasts longer. It has a large negative impact on your life.

Many symptoms of PTSD and depression overlap, including:

- Feeling detached from loved ones
- Difficulty experiencing positive emotions
- Decreased motivation to engage in regularly enjoyed activities

Low mood and the brain

Chemicals in your brain influence how you think, feel, and act. Two important ones that impact your mood are serotonin and dopamine. Negative mood states often occur when these chemicals are released in low levels.

Boosting these brain chemicals can help you shift towards a more positive state of mind. There are several things you can try to help increase your brain’s output of serotonin and dopamine, including:

- Physical activity
- Goal setting
- Eating nutrient-rich foods

- Trying something new
- Spending time in nature

Incorporating one (or many) of these habits into your daily routines may help improve your mood over time.

Thinking traps

Everybody experiences unhelpful thinking styles, also called thinking traps. These can match (and often worsen) your low mood states.

Thinking traps are especially common for people experiencing depression, anxiety, and PTSD. They have the power to impact how you interpret the world and the conclusions you come to.

Identifying when you're falling into a thinking trap can be the first step to getting out of it. Increasing your self-awareness can help you escape negative thought cycles and decrease the gloomy mood states that often accompany them.

Some of the most common thinking traps include:

Thinking trap	Definition	Example	Counter thought
Catastrophizing	Expecting the worst-case scenario to happen, no matter how unlikely it might be in reality.	"I'm going to make a fool of myself at the gym. Everyone will laugh at me. I won't be able to survive the embarrassment."	"I may feel embarrassed, but others at the gym have probably felt that too. They will not judge me. I can ask someone for help if I need it."

Thinking trap	Definition	Example	Counter thought
Mental filtering	Solely focusing on negative events while dismissing positive or neutral information.	"Everyone hated my presentation. A lot of people looked engaged and gave me compliments afterwards, but one person seemed bored with the whole thing."	"I should be proud that I demonstrated a high capability of doing my job."
All-or-nothing thinking	Seeing things in extremes or as black-or-white options. There's either all good or all bad – and nothing in between.	"I planned to eat only healthy foods, but then I had a piece of chocolate cake. Now my diet is ruined!"	"Mistakes happen, but they do not mean I am a failure."
Labelling	Attaching critical or absolute labels to yourself or others based on behaviours or reactions to a specific situation.	"That went wrong. I'm a failure."	"I failed that time, but I will learn and do better in the future."

Thinking trap	Definition	Example	Counter thought
Magnification and minimization	Magnifying the positive attributes of others while minimizing your own.	"Everyone else is so competent and put together. They do not want to hear about my struggles."	"I deserve to talk about my struggles. Talking about how I'm feeling may help someone else."
Shoulding and musting	Placing undue pressure on yourself to meet unrealistic expectations.	"I must pick up as many additional shifts as possible or else I will let my co-workers down."	"My value as a co-worker is not conditional on picking up additional shifts. I need to take care of myself first so I can be the best version of myself for others."
Personalization	Assuming personal blame for everything that goes wrong in your life.	"My kid got in trouble at school today because I didn't spend enough time with him. It happened because I work so much."	"My child might have made a mistake, but I am not in control of his behaviour and can only talk to him about it."

Thinking trap	Definition	Example	Counter thought
Emotional reasoning	Interpreting a situation based on your emotions in the moment.	"I feel really anxious on this plane ride. Something bad is about to happen."	"Feelings are not facts. I have flown many times before, and nothing bad has ever happened. I can accept my feelings of anxiety without believing something awful will happen."

Activities

Naming emotions

Often, labelling a negative emotion can help you feel better. Naming an emotion is a skillful technique that requires paying attention to how you feel, understanding what you feel, and using language to communicate it — even if only to yourself.

The next time you notice a strong feeling, pause and label the emotion you are experiencing. Be as specific as possible.

In 1982, Dr. Gloria Willcox created The Feeling Wheel

(https://allthefeez.app/static/feelz/pdf/the_feeling_wheel_pdf_allthefeez_dot_app.pdf)

as a tool to help people identify and talk about their emotions. It still works today! You can use it to help assess your own condition.

(For an interactive version of the model, try The Emotion Wheel app

(<https://allthefeez.app/emotion-wheel/>) by All The Feelz.)

Increase motivation

Use checklists and goal setting to track your short- and long-term accomplishments.
Reward yourself for every win, no matter how big or small.

“Scheduled” emotional release

Put a fixed amount of time in your schedule — typically no more than 30 minutes — to check in with your emotions. Let yourself cry or yell privately if you need to.

If you’re experiencing negative emotions, physical exercise can help relieve anxiety by reducing stress and tension in your muscles.

Grounding

Use your senses — sight, taste, touch, smell, and sound — to get out of your feelings and into your body. Cycle through each sense and pick out things you notice using each one (five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can feel, etc.).

Alternatively, you can do a short activity that engages your senses, like holding ice in your hands or walking barefoot on grass.

Self love

Do one small thing that makes you happy every day to remind yourself that you deserve to feel good.

Writing prompts

Identify your emotions

How have your moods and emotions been impacted by stress and trauma? Consider the feelings of guilt, shame, anger, and fear. What does each one mean to you? When do you encounter these feelings? How do you experience them?

Challenge negative thoughts

Write down the negative thoughts you have about yourself. Using the table above, try to identify any thinking traps you may have fallen into. Then write down why each thought might be untrue.

3. The impact of trauma on the body

This page is for you if:

- You experience familiar physical sensations in circumstances that you associate with previously stressful situations
- You feel withdrawn or disconnected from your surroundings and like you lack control of your actions or emotions

The body's stress response

The human body is designed to respond to stressful situations. Your body's hormone control centre, called the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, regulates hormones including cortisol.

The HPA axis releases cortisol when a physical or psychological stressor is present to trigger your body's defensive mechanism. This includes the fight-or-flight response, which acts on multiple systems inside you.

Typically, your body signals the HPA axis to stop releasing cortisol when the stressor is dealt with and your stress response can safely end.

However, chronic or extreme stress can lead to disruptions in the HPA axis that impair your body's ability to return to a calm state.

Trauma, especially when it is severe or prolonged, can cause your body to remain stuck in defence mode. This results in symptoms like:

- Increased heart rate, blood pressure, hormone levels, and inflammation
- Increased threat detection, including being jumpy, easily startled, or on edge
- Feeling hypervigilant or needing to scan your environment for danger
- Irritability
- Difficulty relaxing or falling asleep
- Shaking or crying

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- Feelings of restlessness, tingling, or numbness

The Window of Tolerance

The Window of Tolerance is the optimal zone of arousal in which you can function and cope most effectively. Every person's window is different.

When you are within your own Window of Tolerance, you can:

- Think more clearly
- Process information better
- Concentrate better
- Make more informed decisions

Chronic stress or trauma can make your window become much narrower, meaning it becomes easier for you to get pushed into a state of over-arousal or under-arousal.

Survival responses

Hyperarousal

Over-arousal, also known as hyperarousal, activates the body's fight-or-flight response to stress. This involves aggression, shortness of breath, increased heart rate, and increased shakiness or muscle tension.

Hyperaroused responses include:

- Cry for help: When your body detects a threatening situation and instinctively becomes prepared to defend itself
- Fight: When you're angry or irritated and you engage in impulsive and/or aggressive behaviours
- Flight: When you feel denial or anxiety. This stress may cause you to evade, omit, or sabotage to escape a stressful situation

Hypoarousal

Under-arousal, also known as hypoarousal, can involve feeling numb or withdrawn from your surroundings, feeling detached from your body or environment or as though things around you aren't real, or feeling not in control of your body's movements.

Hypoaroused responses include:

- Freeze: This involves feeling emotionally detached or withdrawn from your environment
- Submit: This involves surrendering to the consequences of a stressful situation when your body feels too overwhelmed to fight or flee

Dissociation

Dissociation is a disconnection or detachment between your active mind and your thoughts, memories, feelings, actions, or sense of self. It most often occurs during a state of under-arousal.

Dissociation is a way that your body copes with overwhelming thoughts, feelings, or memories — either by shutting down, “numbing out,” or disconnecting completely from your surroundings.

Its symptoms range from subtle to extreme. They include:

- Disengagement (not paying attention or spacing out)
- Emotional numbing
- Memory disturbances (e.g., gaps)
- Depersonalization (feeling outside of your body or as if it does not belong to you)
- Derealisation (feeling like things around you are unreal or distorted)
- Identity dissociation (feeling like a different person from yourself)

Activities

Square breathing

Connecting to your breath can help you move back inside your Window of Tolerance during times of stress.

Box breathing, also known as four-square breathing, involves inhaling to a count of four, holding air in your lungs for a count of four, exhaling at the same pace, and then holding your lungs empty for a count of four before starting over.

It can help to visualize your breath travelling around the sides of a square while you are breathing.

Grounding 5-4-3-2-1

Use this countdown technique to mindfully take in details of your surroundings. Notice:

- Five things you can see
- Four things you can hear
- Three things you can feel
- Two things you can smell
- One thing you can taste

Try to notice small details that your mind would usually tune out, such as distant sounds or the texture of an ordinary object.

Body scan

The body scan is one of the most effective ways to begin a mindfulness meditation practice. Its purpose is to tune in to your body — i.e., to connect to your physical self — and notice without judgment any sensations you are feeling.

- Sit quietly or lie down
- Start at one end of your body and focus on each body part
- Notice any areas of tension and then try to soften or relax them

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- Continue until you have mindfully scanned each part of your body

Writing prompts

1. Make a list of people, places, or things that can push you out of your Window of Tolerance. Try ranking them in order of most impactful to least. Next, write a similar list of the people, places, or things that help bring you back inside your window during times of stress.
2. The next time you notice you are feeling stressed, take a moment to write down what you're experiencing in your body. Consider each body part. Notice where you feel tension, shakiness, or numbness. Describe the sensations in as much detail as you can.

4. The impact of trauma on cognition and problem solving

This page is for you if:

- You have unexpected reactions to reminders of past stressful situations (e.g., feeling afraid if you see someone cough)
- Your body instinctively reacts in real-life situations without your explicit thought or intention — for instance, feeling like your body is on high alert for danger when you are out with friends or family
- You have increased difficulty understanding or remembering things that people say to you

Layers of the brain

While the brain is a complex organ, it can be broken down into three layers: survival brain, emotional brain, and learning brain.

Survival brain

This is the oldest part of the brain. It asks the question, “Am I safe?”

The survival layer is responsible for:

- Taking in information from your environment
- Coordinating reflexive, defensive behaviours during times of threat
- Activating your instincts to protect yourself when you don’t have time to think before acting

Emotional brain

This middle layer of the brain is your feeling centre. It can ask the question, “Am I fearful or sad?”

The emotional layer is responsible for:

- Emotional learning
- Storing memories
- Controlling the release of hormones

Because emotions and memories are connected in this way, your brain can be unintentionally trained to respond with big emotions to anything that triggers a particular memory.

If you experienced overwhelming fear, sadness, or shame during a traumatic event, then you may be likelier to keep experiencing those emotions whenever you are reminded of that event, even well after it has passed.

Learning brain

The highest layer of the brain asks the question, “What can I learn from this?”

The learning brain is involved with:

- Cognition
- Problem solving
- Decision making
- Attention
- Learning new skills
- Adapting to your environment

Stress and trauma can keep you in your survival brain. Your body’s energy and attention are instinctually put on the defensive while you try to answer the question, “Am I safe?”

This situation makes it difficult for incoming information to move up towards your learning brain. You might find yourself struggling with cognition and problem solving as you make decisions that guide your behaviours.

Stress can feel like a boulder that you are trying to drag out of a swamp. Its weight can cause you to slip backwards.

The more stress you carry, the easier it is for you to stay in your survival brain. You can remain in a state of increased vigilance and threat detection — far away from the solid environment of your learning brain, where you can think, plan, and solve problems.

Stress and the learning brain

Stress, trauma, and PTSD can negatively impact four core areas of cognition within the learning brain.

Memory

- The ability to remember and use information for tasks such as calculation or reasoning
- Changes in memory are one of the most common symptoms of PTSD

Cognitive effects of stress	Impacts
Reliving traumatic events through intrusive memories or flashbacks	Some people who have experienced trauma describe intrusive memories as movies that play on repeat in the back of their minds.
Memory loss, gaps, or total amnesia	Forgetting the timeline of a traumatic event or entire portions of a traumatic memory.
Deficits in short-term memory	Forgetting the name of someone you just met or where you parked your car earlier.
Deficits in multitasking or being able to keep multiple thoughts in mind at once	Difficulty holding an address in mind while listening to directions to your destination.

Cognitive flexibility

- The ability to hold and switch between different tasks, concepts, or activities and their corresponding behaviours
- Trauma makes it difficult to access this function because your resources are consumed by your survival brain

Cognitive effects of stress	Impacts
Reduced ability to acquire and integrate new information at a fast pace	Difficulty understanding the gist of a five-minute phone conversation compared to having the same information in an email you can reread.
Reduced ability to solve problems creatively	Getting “stuck” when solutions are not clear-cut.
Challenged to quickly adjust responses to changing conditions	Feeling unable to carry on with your day if something unplanned comes up.
Increase in impulsive behaviours	Unintentionally expressing frustration when it may not be productive to your situation.

Concentration

- The ability to focus and maintain a single thought process while ignoring distractions
- People diagnosed with PTSD may struggle to sustain their attention because they are hypervigilant and constantly scanning their surroundings for threats

Cognitive effects of stress	Impacts
Reduced ability to generate, direct, and maintain alertness so you can correctly process information	Difficulty focusing on or extracting important details from conversations with others.
Reduced ability to sustain your attention for prolonged periods of time	Difficulty focusing on reading an article or watching a TV show.
Increase in zoning out	Feeling withdrawn or daydreaming throughout the day, whether at work, home, or out with friends.
Increase in impulsive thinking	Making decisions quickly without thinking through potential outcomes or consequences.

Decision making

- The ability to consider multiple factors and use logic and reasoning when making decisions
- Good decision making requires several high-level processes (e.g., attention, memory, emotion regulation) that can be impacted by trauma

Cognitive effects of stress	Impacts
Distrusting your sense of right and wrong	Feeling conflicted by what you instinctively want to do versus what is expected of you.
Making decisions based on emotion rather than logic	Letting feelings of guilt result in avoiding making decisions altogether.

Cognitive effects of stress	Impacts
Difficulty recalling important information that could aid decision-making	Forgetting about somebody's offer to help after starting a task on your own.
An inability to evaluate and incorporate all relevant information given a focus on threat detection or safety	Focusing mainly on negative details of a situation when deciding a course of action.

These cognitive changes can be incredibly taxing for those who have experienced trauma. However, it is important to remember that the brain is malleable. We can often recover from cognitive challenges.

Activities

Problem solving

When you have a complex problem, break it into the following chunks to make it more manageable:

- First, define the problem
- Second, define the goal or goals
- Third, brainstorm all possible solutions
- Finally, evaluate each solution and select the best one

S.T.O.P.

Practice the S.T.O.P. skill to connect with your learning brain:

- S — Stop: Notice when you're acting from either your survival brain or emotional brain, not your learning brain.
- T — Take a step back: It can be hard to make a decision when you're in the heat of a moment. Give yourself space to properly evaluate what is going on.
- O — Observe: Notice what's going on both around and inside of you.

- P — Proceed thoughtfully: Ask yourself questions like, “What do I want from this situation?” or “What are my goals?” or “What choice might make this situation better or worse?” or “What action will allow for success?”

Writing prompts

Think of a challenging situation you recently experienced and describe it from the perspective of each of your brain’s three layers:

1. Survival brain
2. Emotional brain
3. Learning brain

5. Social relationships after trauma

This page is for you if:

- You feel distant, misunderstood, rejected, or excluded by others
- You have difficulty engaging in healthy social interactions and maintaining relationships (e.g., setting boundaries, resolving conflicts)
- You have difficulty understanding the motivations, thoughts, and feelings of others
- You feel emotionally numb, have low empathy for others, or reduced interest in social interactions

Trauma and social relationships

Stress and trauma deeply affect our mental well-being and can significantly impact our relationships with others. This can include affecting the way we think, feel, and behave in relationships.

It is very common for people who have experienced trauma to notice changes or challenges in their relationships, including difficulties with:

- Intimacy and trust
- Sex drive
- Communication
- Avoiding people, places, or conversations
- Attachment (e.g., feeling overdependent, detached, or overprotective of others)

Several kinds of relationships can be impacted after stressful or traumatic experiences. These can include your professional relationships with:

- Superiors
- Mentees
- Teammates and colleagues

As well as relationships outside of work, including:

- Partners
- Children
- Parents and family members
- Friends
- Pets
- Strangers

How does trauma affect your social relationships?

Trauma can impact your relationships and social life in multiple ways.

Impacts of trauma	Symptoms
Thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How you think about yourself, your body, or your value (e.g., negative self-image)• How deserving you feel of love, affection, or praise from others• How much you feel you can trust and rely on yourself or others• Your beliefs about how safe or fair the world is• How you understand the thoughts and feelings of other people• Your ability to concentrate during interactions with others or resolve conflict

Impacts of trauma	Symptoms
Feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You're easily startled and hypervigilant, meaning always on edge or worried that something bad will happen It's difficult for you to unwind or feel relaxed You have a loss of interest in the people, places, or activities you used to enjoy You feel emotionally numb, meaning empty or hollow You find it difficult to experience sympathy or empathy for other people, even your closest loved ones You're easily irritated or impatient, even about things you used to be able to (or think you should be able to) tolerate
Behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You have difficulty sleeping, which can lead to excessive tiredness and fatigue You have angry outbursts or a "short fuse" with those closest to you You withdraw socially and isolate yourself You avoid people or places that you used to spend time around You have increased conflict with those closest to you You engage in other (potentially unhelpful) coping strategies, such as self-harm and substance use

If you have experienced trauma and developed one or a combination of these symptoms, you may become caught in a cycle of:

1. Increased irritability or discomfort around others
2. Withdrawing, pushing others away, or even noticing others pull away from you
3. Feeling disconnected, abandoned, and/or unworthy — which may further increase your irritability or discomfort around others

Tips for family and friends

Social support is extremely important to recovery from trauma. You can share these tips with your family and friends.

1. **Help your loved one create routines.** Structure and predictable schedules can restore a sense of stability and security to someone who has experienced trauma. Create routines that involve having your loved one help with groceries or housework (e.g., maintaining regular times for meals).
2. **Speak to your loved one about the future and make plans.** This can help counteract the common feeling among people who have experienced trauma that their future is limited.
3. **Help your loved one remember their strengths.** Encourage them to believe they are capable of recovery. Remind them of their strengths, positive qualities, and successes.
4. **Help your loved one identify and manage triggers.** Ask your loved one about helpful things they've done in the past to respond to a trigger — as well as whatever things they tried that didn't help them. Then come up with a joint game plan for how you will respond together in the future.
5. **Ask your loved one directly how you can help.** For example, you can ask: "What can I do to help you right now?" Ask if a timeout or change of scenery will be useful.
6. **Be a good listener.** Don't push a person who has experienced trauma to talk about it. If they choose to share, listen without expectations or judgments. Make it clear that you're interested and that you care, but don't worry about giving advice. It's the act of listening attentively — not what you say — that is most helpful to your loved one.
7. **Educate yourself about trauma and posttraumatic stress injury (PTSI).** The more you know about trauma's symptoms, effects, and treatment options, the better equipped you'll be to help your loved one, understand what they are going through, and keep things in perspective.

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8. **Accept (and expect) mixed feelings.** As you support your loved one, be prepared for a complicated mix of feelings — including anger or frustration. Remember to tend to your own emotions while supporting your loved one.

Strategies for social relationships after experiencing trauma

Pace yourself

Don't expect too much from yourself too soon. Take social breaks even when you are feeling good. Allow yourself more downtime — or “you” time — than you typically would.

Identify your triggers

Pay attention to your mind and body. Notice when something feels good or bad. When someone or something upsets you, don't judge that person or your emotional response. Instead, get curious. Ask yourself if you're upset about the current moment or if you're reacting to a reminder of a past stressful situation.

Ask for help

Often, others want to help us, but they don't know how. Think about the ways those close to you could make you feel cared for and supported. Share this information with them.

Write a letter

Write a letter — which you don't have to send — to your loved ones expressing your gratitude for their impact on your life. In the first half of the letter, write about the positive ways that they made you feel supported before you experienced trauma. In the second half, describe the ways you would like them to better support you now that you have.

6. Moral injury

This page is for you if:

- You struggle to cope with having to make difficult decisions
- You feel let down or even betrayed by others whom you expected to do the right thing and/or protect you
- You struggle to make sense of things you've done, things that have been done to you, and what's happening in the world

What is moral injury?

Like posttraumatic stress, moral injury is a type of stress response that follows a morally distressing situation. It feels like an injury to your moral compass.

Morally distressing situations, also known as morally injurious events, arise when you feel your morals are being violated. They make you question right and wrong and challenge your faith in the goodness of yourself, others, or the world.

Not everyone who experiences trauma goes on to develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Similarly, moral violations and moral pain do not always mean you will develop a moral injury.

Moral pain exists on a spectrum. On one end there are common moral challenges and resulting moral frustrations. (For example, you may experience guilt if you call in sick or feel angry when a request for time off is denied.) At the other end of the spectrum there are more severe moral violations, including morally injurious events that result in moral injury.

What's considered a morally injurious event?

Morally injurious events can be grouped into two kinds of situations.

Perpetration

Perpetration events occur when you do something that violates your morals by:

- Commission (e.g., doing something that hurts someone else)
- Omission (e.g., not doing something that helps someone else)
- Failing to prevent a perceived immoral act (e.g., not doing something that prevents harm to someone else)

Betrayal

Betrayal events occur when your morals are violated by someone or something you trust, like a family member or close friend or a powerful institution or organization.

What are the symptoms of a moral injury?

A moral injury can result in symptoms across multiple domains of your mental well-being. You may experience:

Emotional changes

- Guilt
- Shame
- Anger
- Hopelessness
- Anxiety

Cognitive changes

- Loss of trust in yourself or others
- Existential crises (e.g., questioning your purpose and/or the meaning of life)
- Spiritual questioning or doubts (e.g., querying your faith in a higher power)
- A difference in the ways you evaluate the integrity of yourself or others
- Feeling like the world is an unsafe or unjust place

Behavioural changes

- Social withdrawal, isolation, or disengagement
- Self-harm

Activities

Create a responsibility pie chart

Use this technique if you experience emotions like guilt, shame, or anger about who to blame for a challenging event or situation.

1. Make a list of all possible factors that contributed to the challenging situation, even if you think they are only one percent responsible.
2. Roughly estimate the percentage of responsibility you can assign to each possible factor.
3. Assign yourself the remaining percentage once you have listed all other factors.
4. Draw a pie chart with each factor claiming its appropriate size of slice.
5. Now that you see the full picture of all contributing factors, is there as much blame left for yourself as you initially thought?

Connect with gratitude

Gratitude can counteract many of the negative emotions we experience. Take five minutes each day to identify three things you feel grateful for.

Writing prompts

1. Process a difficult decision you've had to make. Include the internal struggle, your own feelings of responsibility, and how your decision impacted the way you feel about yourself and others.
2. Similar to the responsibility pie chart described above, write a short letter describing the challenging event or situation and all the factors that contributed to it. Pay attention to which factors were in your control and which ones were not.

3. Morally challenging situations can lead to feelings of shame, worthlessness, or a loss of trust in yourself. To challenge some of those feelings, make a list of things you like about yourself. Put simply, what about you makes you feel worthy, valued, and proud?

7. Lifestyle factors

This page is for you if:

- You have trouble falling asleep or getting restful sleep during the night
- You are looking for strategies to boost your brain health and increase the effectiveness of your coping strategies
- You want to learn about how taking care of your body can improve your ability to tolerate mental stress and help with emotional regulation

Sleep

Sleep is a state of unconsciousness in which the body is at rest in response to external stimuli, but very much active and responsive to internal stimuli. It is thought to play a restorative role for both the body and brain. It gives your brain cells a chance to shut down and repair themselves.

Your quality of sleep and rest impacts all areas of your health and wellness. This is because the brain controls all aspects of your body, including:

- **Physical health:** Sleep heals and repairs cells, increases immune system functioning, and balances hormones.
- **Mental health:** Quality of sleep can influence mood and impact emotion regulation abilities.
- **Productivity:** If you lack adequate sleep you may take longer to finish tasks, be more likely to make mistakes, and have slower reaction times.
- **Consolidating memory:** Your ability to learn and store new information is dependent on good quality sleep.

People who experience high stress and/or trauma often notice an impact on their sleep habits. For example, sleep disturbances impact 70–91 per cent of individuals diagnosed with PTSD.

These problems include:

- Difficulties falling asleep due to racing thoughts. Feeling like your mind cannot settle
- Less restful sleep
- Difficulty staying asleep
- Upsetting dreams or nightmares

Insufficient or low-quality sleep can be impactful during the daytime hours when you are awake, including:

- Reduced ability to learn or solve problems
- Difficulty making decisions and concentrating
- Reduced ability to regulate emotions and manage stress
- Low mood and increased irritability

Because many of the consequences of poor sleep overlap with symptoms of posttraumatic stress, they often perpetuate and exacerbate one another. For example, many people who experience symptoms of trauma will notice high levels of stress, making it difficult to relax, wind down, and achieve restful sleep. In turn, this can decrease their ability to cope with daytime stressors.

Nutrition

It's also important to nourish the brain. Food is essential to grow new brain cells, transmit important nutrients and chemicals, provide fuel for your nervous system, and help protect you from disease.

Nutrition is an important part of a healthy and fit brain.

A healthy diet is good for your body and your mind. This includes fresh fruits and vegetables, lean proteins, whole grains, nuts, seeds, spices, and herbs.

A nutritious diet is important for people who have experienced high stress or trauma. Its benefits include:

- Increased mood and emotional health

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- Improved cognition and decreased risk of cognitive decline
 - Increased sense of control
 - Increased energy and motivation

Movement

Physical activity is a vital part of any healthy lifestyle. Regular exercise has many benefits that can minimize symptoms of stress and PTSD, including:

- Improved mood: Exercise increases dopamine and serotonin, the chemicals in the brain that make you feel good
- Improved cognition: Exercise stimulates growth of new brain cells and reduces harmful chemicals in the brain
- Improved sleep and restfulness
- Increased feelings of strength and self-esteem
- An outlet for intense emotions (e.g., anger or anxiety)
- Stronger mind-body connection
- An opportunity to set goals and develop new healthier routines
- Opportunities to connect with others and form a community around a shared interest or hobby
- Reduced stress and increased opportunities for play and fun

There are many lifestyle factors that can impact your ability to tolerate stress and recover after traumatic experiences.

This resource is not an extensive list. Remember: everything that affects you and your body also affects your mental health.

Activities

Progressive muscle relaxation

This technique teaches you how to relax your muscles through a two-step process.

First, tense a particular muscle group in your body, such as your biceps or fists, for about three seconds.

Next, gradually release the tension and notice how those muscles feel when relaxed.

You can start from your toes and work your way up to your forehead. This exercise will lower overall tension and stress levels and help you relax. It can also improve sleep and reduce physical problems such as stomach aches and headaches.

Practice sleep hygiene

Create a bedtime routine that you complete each night before sleeping. It might include a final check of your phone or email, cuddle time with a pet or loved one, brushing your teeth, a meditation or breathing exercise, reading, or anything else you like to do before bed.

Complete the routine in the same order at the same time each night. The repetitions will cue your body that it is time to wind down and relax, which can help improve your sleep.

Writing prompt

Write your responses to these questions:

- What do you fuel your body with? What kinds of food, substances, movement, and/or rest are you giving to yourself?
- How do you feel after you give yourself those things?
- What kinds of fuel would you like to give your body? Why, and how so?
- What is getting in the way of giving yourself the things you want?

8. Cultural considerations

This page is for you if:

- You've noticed it is hard to let go of negative emotions, leading to a persistent low mood
- You're stuck in cycles of negative thinking that lead to feelings of hopelessness, guilt, or blame
- You find it hard to control fear-based feelings like stress and anxiety and would rather focus on the emotions that keep you calm and relaxed

Can you bring your whole self to work?

Human beings are incredibly complex. We all have multiple aspects to our identities that contribute to how we see ourselves and the world around us.

Your identity — for example, being Black, gay, Muslim, non-binary, autistic, deaf, or living with chronic pain — is who you are.

It may not be possible for you to leave these parts of yourself behind when you go to work. There are many parts of your identity that cannot be switched off, including:

- Race and ethnicity
- Sexual orientation
- Gender identity
- Age
- Religion
- Ability
- Neurodiversity
- Health status

It can be stressful to feel that you should or must put these intersecting, multi-faceted aspects of your identity aside when your experience of the world is rooted in them. This

may be particularly true during personal, societal, or global crises that bring awareness to particular parts of your identity — for example, increased awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement or the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black and racialized communities.

Navigating these experiences in high-stress or unsupportive environments can lead to personal challenges including:

- Difficulty reconciling conflicting roles and responsibilities
- Conflict or confusion within your values, or between your values and the values of others
- Feeling shame or hiding important parts of yourself in certain settings
- Feelings of anger, injustice, or betrayal (towards yourself, an important other, and/or society)
- Feeling powerless or at the mercy of society's views and assumptions about you
- Compassion fatigue
- Feeling misunderstood, unseen, and/or underappreciated

How do different cultures experience mental health?

Apart from these stressors, there are cultural and social differences to how we all experience mental health.

- Different cultures and communities can experience trauma differently. What might be traumatic for someone from one culture may not be for someone else from a different culture.
- Different cultures and communities can experience mental health symptoms differently. For example, people from some cultures are more likely than others to describe physical symptoms (e.g., stomach aches, feeling heavy or weighted, cardiac-related issues, etc.) when discussing their mental health.
- Different cultures and communities can differ in beliefs, values, and ideas around mental health. In some cultures, seeking mental health help is considered acceptable. In others, it may be discouraged or even considered shameful.

- Different cultures and communities can have different ideas and ideals around healing the mind, body, and spirit. Therapeutic practices can vary greatly across cultures.

For people who grew up in a different culture but now live and work in a predominantly white Western community, it can be difficult to adapt to the fixed perspective through which that community views mental health. In addition, people who grew up within Western culture and work in the same environment may disagree with how societal views have evolved over time.

Activities

Connect

No one else has ever lived through your exact experiences. An important part of honouring your own complex identity can involve connecting with others who share or have shared some of its parts.

Seek out others who have part or parts of your identity in common. Connect over the nuanced ways those parts inform your overall experience of the world.

Identify your hats

Take some time to think about the parts of your identity that are most important to you. Write them out in a list. Next, indicate which, if any, are in conflict with your current place in the world. For each of these conflicts, jot down a few examples of ways that you already are (or could be) engaging with and expressing these parts of yourself.

Writing prompt

What were you taught about mental health growing up? How, if at all, have your views changed over the course of your lifetime?