

Understanding Trauma



Traumatic events can deeply affect people, triggering a range of emotional, physical, and behavioural responses. Reactions to trauma vary based on factors like the trauma type, your past experiences, current support systems and coping strategies. Understanding these responses, how to care for yourself, and when to seek support can help you navigate the post-trauma experience.

Understanding Trauma Responses

A trauma response may occur following any threat, actual or perceived, to the life or physical safety of the individual, or others.

These threats include, but are not limited to, accidents, natural disasters (like bushfires or floods), physical or sexual assault, war, torture, or terrorism. Exposure to the event may be direct (experienced or witnessed) or indirect (confronted with or learned about), and can occur once or repeatedly.

When people experience or witness a traumatic experience their responses often fall into physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural symptom categories. These symptoms are the body's normal response to threat and stress, and should settle with time and care.

1. Physical Responses

Trauma can affect the body in many ways. The body's stress response, often referred to as "fight, flight, or freeze," can become heightened, leading to:

- Fatigue or exhaustion
- Sleep disturbances or nightmares
- Increased heart rate or tension
- Chronic pain or muscle tightness
- Headaches or gastrointestinal issues

2. Emotional Responses

Emotions after trauma can range from numbness to intense feelings. Common emotional responses include:

- Shock or disbelief
- Anxiety or fear
- Anger or irritability
- Sadness or grief
- Guilt or shame, especially if the individual feels responsible or that they could have done more.

3. Cognitive Responses

Trauma can also affect how individuals think about themselves and the world. Some common cognitive responses include:

- Intrusive thoughts or flashbacks
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Negative thoughts about the self, others, or the future
- Dissociation, where the person feels detached from reality or as if they are watching events unfold from outside their body.

4. Behavioural Responses

After experiencing trauma, individuals may change their behaviours in ways that help them manage stress or make them feel safer. These include:

- Avoidance of reminders or situations related to the trauma
- Withdrawal from social interactions or activities that were once enjoyable
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs to numb the pain
- Hyper-vigilance, where the person becomes overly alert or anxious in potentially unsafe situations

Any of these physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses may fluctuate over time and vary in intensity, depending on the individual and the nature of the traumatic experience.

For the majority of people any symptoms will gradually lessen within the first few weeks, with good support and healthy coping strategies.

Taking Care of Yourself

While the responses to trauma are natural, self-care is essential in managing its effects. Here are some practical steps to help individuals cope:

1. Ground Yourself

Engage in grounding techniques, such as mindful breathing or focusing on your surroundings, to help you stay connected to the present moment.

2. Take Care of Your Body

Focus on nourishing your body with adequate sleep, hydration, and healthy food. Regular physical activity can help reduce physical tension and support mental health.

3. Connect with Supportive People

Trauma can lead to feelings of isolation, but connecting with trusted friends, family members, or peers can provide emotional relief. Having someone who listens without judgment can help you feel validated and supported.

4. Establish a Routine

Re-establishing a sense of normalcy can provide stability after trauma. Having a regular schedule for daily activities helps restore a sense of control.

5. Practice Self-Compassion

It is important to be gentle and kind with yourself during the recovery process. Avoid blame or shame. Recognise that healing takes time.

When to Seek Further Support

If the symptoms of trauma persist beyond two (2) weeks, or become overwhelming, seek professional support. Book an appointment with your GP, psychologist or workplace EAP service. Or if urgent/critical use the 24/7 services listed below.

Everyone responds to trauma in their unique way, and the recovery process takes time. Understanding common trauma responses, practicing self-care, and knowing when to seek further support are crucial steps in the healing journey.

Remember, there is no right or wrong way to feel or respond after trauma—what matters is finding strategies and support that work for you.

Support Services (24/7)

Lifeline: Tel. 13 11 14 www.lifeline.org.au

Suicide Call Back Service: 1300 659 467
www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636
www.beyondblue.org.au

Resources

[Helping Others After Trauma](#), Phoenix Australia