

Common Reactions to Trauma

Re-experiencing the Trauma

Trauma survivors may re-experience their trauma through thoughts, feelings, memories, and other means. Re-experiencing a trauma can be very distressing, and may trigger uncomfortable emotions such as fear, anger, or sadness.

- Nightmares
- Flashbacks (uncontrollable vivid images and memories of the trauma)
- Distressing thoughts and feelings about the trauma
- Emotional distress or physical responses after experiencing a trauma reminder

Avoidance of Trauma Reminders

Because reminders of a trauma can be so distressing, it is common for trauma survivors to use avoidance to control these reactions.

- Using drugs or alcohol to suppress uncomfortable thoughts and emotions
- Avoidance of activities related to the trauma
- Avoidance of people, places, or things related to the trauma
- Suppressing thoughts related to the trauma
- Avoidance of conversations about the trauma

Negative Thoughts or Feelings

Negative thoughts or feelings may begin or worsen after experiencing a trauma. Some of these thoughts and feelings might not seem to relate directly to the trauma.

- Excessive blame toward oneself or others related to the trauma
- Loss of interest in activities
- Feelings of isolation or disconnection from surroundings
- Difficulty experiencing positive feelings
- Loss of memory related to the trauma
- Excessive negative thoughts about oneself or the world

Hyperarousal

Reactivity, or a feeling of being “on edge”, may begin or worsen after experiencing a trauma. This category includes a broad range of physical and psychological symptoms.

- Becoming irritable, quick to anger, or aggressive
- Heightened startle reaction
- Difficulty concentrating
- Frequently scanning the environment or watching for trauma reminders
- Difficulty sleeping
- Feelings of anxiety, and related symptoms such as a racing heart, upset stomach, or headaches
- Risky or impulsive behaviors

Triggers



Trigger: A stimulus—such as a person, place, situation, or thing—that contributes to an unwanted emotional or behavioral response.

The Problem

Describe the problem your triggers are contributing to. What's the worst-case scenario, if you are exposed to your triggers?

<hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

Trigger Categories

Just about *anything* can be a trigger. To begin exploring your own triggers, think about each of the categories listed below. Is there a specific emotion that acts as a trigger for you? How about a person or place? List your responses in the provided spaces.

Emotional State	<hr/> <hr/>
People	<hr/> <hr/>
Places	<hr/> <hr/>
Things	<hr/> <hr/>
Thoughts	<hr/> <hr/>
Activities / Situations	<hr/> <hr/>

Tips for Dealing with Triggers

- Oftentimes, the best way to deal with a trigger is to avoid it. This might mean making changes to your lifestyle, relationships, or daily routine.
- Create a strategy to deal with your triggers head on, just in case. Your strategy might include coping skills, a list of trusted people you can talk to, or rehearsed phrases to help you get out of a troublesome situation.
- Don't wait until the heat of the moment to test your coping strategy. *Practice!*

Triggers



In this section, you will develop a plan for dealing with your three biggest triggers. Review your plan regularly, and practice each of the strategies.

Describe your three biggest triggers, in detail.

Trigger	#1	
	#2	
	#3	

Describe your strategy for *avoiding or reducing exposure* to each trigger.

Trigger	#1	
	#2	
	#3	

Describe your strategy for dealing with each trigger head on, when they cannot be avoided.

Trigger	#1	
	#2	
	#3	

Skills for Regulating Emotions

Paying Attention to Positive Events

A common and unfortunate habit is to pay more attention to negative, rather than positive events and experiences.

We are often inclined to focus on one item of bad news among numerous other examples of good news, or a single criticism among multiple compliments.

When you find your attention singling out or honing in on the negative elements of an incident, make a conscious effort to stop. It may take some effort, but try to draw your attention back to the positive aspects instead.

One helpful way to practice your ability to refocus is by making time for a positive experience each day and consciously recognizing the positive aspects of it. Choose an example positive experience from the box to schedule into your day, and use the free space to brainstorm any more you come up with:

Taking a walk in nature	Catching up with a friend or relative
Listening to your favorite album or artist	Exploring the countryside or the city
Cooking and savoring your favorite food	Doing something kind for someone else
Curling up with a great book	Taking a long bath or going for a swim

Try to include one or more positive experiences into your daily routine and with regular practice, you will build up your ability to focus on the positive.

Fact-Checking

With hindsight, everybody can recall times when they have blown things out of proportion, perhaps reacted in a certain way or overemphasized one specific aspect of a situation. Fact checking is a technique that allows us to bring intense emotions back into proportion.

Use these three simple questions to fact-check your situation when you find yourself experiencing a negative feeling in the moment:

#1

What happened that gave rise to this emotion?

#2

What am I assuming about this experience, or what explanations am I giving myself in my head?

#3

Are my feelings proportionate to the reality of these circumstances? Or are they more related to my assumptions and interpretations?

P.L.E.A.S.E.

Our physical and mental states impact on each other – if you're physically unwell or unhealthy, you'll have a tougher time regulating your emotions. Use this P.L.E.A.S.E. acronym as a reminder of how taking care of your body will positively influence your mind.

PL

Treating Physical illness

E

Eating Healthy

A

Avoiding Mood Altering Drugs

S

Sleeping Well

E

Exercising

Opposite Behavior

Our behaviors are usually associated with feelings or emotions that we experience. For example:

- When we feel sad, we might become quiet or look for a way to be alone.
- If we are feeling annoyed, we might snap at someone or get aggressive.

The physical sensations we feel in response to our emotions can often drive our behaviors, and as such, doing the reverse can play a role in altering that emotion.

- If sad feelings generally cause you to retreat inside yourself, try calling a close friend to talk instead.
- If you usually snap at a colleague when you feel annoyed, try taking a deep breath and giving them a genuine compliment about something instead.

Use this space to list the most typical behavior you show in response to a few common negative emotions. In the far right column, describe the opposite behavior or name the action that you would like to try instead.

Emotion	Behavior	Opposite Behavior
Sad <i>e.g. Depressed, lonely, remorseful</i>		
Mad <i>e.g. Angry, hurt, hostile</i>		
Scared <i>e.g. Helpless, insecure, anxious</i>		