

Coping Skills for Traumatic Stress

1. Self-Awareness

Stress is held in the body. Becoming aware of how you respond to trauma, your triggers, and your coping mechanisms can help you to better navigate the challenges of trauma, manage your stress, and seek additional support when needed.

- **Recognizing responses to trauma (see below)**

Becoming aware of your emotional responses to trauma, such as anger, sadness, or fear, enables you to implement emotional regulation strategies and prevent them from escalating.

- **Understanding triggers (see below)**

Identifying the situations, experiences, or memories that trigger anxiety or distress allows you to plan ahead and develop strategies to mitigate these reactions.

- **Developing coping mechanisms**

Understanding which coping mechanisms are most effective for you, and which are not enables you to choose healthier strategies for managing trauma.

- **Seeking support**

Recognizing your limitations and knowing the professional or social support options available means that you can access the help you need for trauma recovery.

- **Promoting resilience**

Self-awareness helps you identify your strengths and past resilience, which can be valuable in navigating the challenges of trauma recovery.

a. Recognizing responses to trauma

- **Physical responses**

- ☐ persistent fatigue
- ☐ nausea/vomiting
- ☐ headaches
- ☐ excessive sweating
- ☐ increased heart rate
- ☐ elevated blood pressure

- ☐ increased breathing rate
- ☐ disturbed sleep/nightmares
- ☐ difficulty falling asleep
- ☐ stomach pain
- ☐ dizziness
- ☐ muscle tension
- ☐ heightened startle response
- ☐ nonspecific bodily complaints

- **Emotional responses**

- ☐ anxiety
- ☐ guilt
- ☐ grief/responsibility
- ☐ confusion
- ☐ panic
- ☐ emotional shock
- ☐ fear
- ☐ numbness
- ☐ feeling disconnected/detached
- ☐ depression
- ☐ oversensitivity
- ☐ wary/mistrustful
- ☐ feeling threatened
- ☐ irritability/anger

- **Cognitive responses**

- ☐ confusion
- ☐ poor attention
- ☐ poor decision making
- ☐ heightened or lowered alertness
- ☐ poor concentration
- ☐ difficulty identifying familiar objects or people
- ☐ increased/decreased awareness of surroundings
- ☐ poor problem solving
- ☐ poor abstract thinking
- ☐ loss of time, place, or person, orientation

- **Behavioural responses**

- ☐ change in social interactions
- ☐ change in speech patterns
- ☐ loss or increase of appetite
- ☐ withdrawal
- ☐ emotional outbursts

- ☐ suspiciousness
- ☐ change in usual communication skills
- ☐ pacing
- ☐ startle reflex
- ☐ hyper alert to environment
- ☐ alcohol consumption
- ☐ inability to rest
- ☐ antisocial acts
- ☐ erratic movements
- ☐ change in sexual functioning

- **Spiritual responses**

- ☐ meaninglessness or purposelessness
- ☐ adrift or directionless
- ☐ guilt
- ☐ anxiety or terror
- ☐ disconnection from systems of care
- ☐ inner uneasiness, unquiet, restlessness
- ☐ powerlessness and loss of self-efficacy
- ☐ frustration or inability to make progress
- ☐ reluctance to interact with family and
- ☐ depression friends
- ☐ despair
- ☐ loss of confidence
- ☐ compensatory behaviours *
- ☐ isolation and abandonment
- ☐ lack of acceptance
- ☐ relationship problems

** Compensatory behaviours include abuse of power, revenge seeking, engaging in superstitious rituals, embracing conspiracy beliefs...*

b. Types of triggers

Trauma triggers are stimuli that evoke a strong emotional or physical reaction in someone who has experienced trauma, often leading to a feeling of reliving the trauma. Triggers can be internal (like thoughts, feelings, or sensations) or external (like sights, sounds, smells, or situations). For example, a car accident survivor might be triggered by the sound of sirens or being in a car, a victim of domestic violence might be triggered by yelling or arguments, or someone who has experienced a natural disaster might be triggered by the smell of smoke or strong winds. When a trigger is encountered, the person's

body and mind may react as if the trauma is happening again, even though it is not. Strategies for managing triggers are explored on subsequent pages.

- **Sensory triggers**

Sounds, smells, sights, tastes, or touch that are associated with the trauma.

- **Situational triggers**

Environments, places, or specific activities that remind the person of the trauma.

- **Emotional triggers**

Feelings, thoughts, or memories associated with the trauma.

- **Anniversaries**

Dates or events related to the trauma.

- **Internal triggers**

Physical sensations, like an elevated heart rate or muscle tension, can also be triggers.

c. Effects of triggering events

- **Flashbacks**

When triggered, a person may feel as if they are reliving the trauma again, complete with thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations.

- **Hyperarousal**

The person may become agitated, anxious, or have difficulty concentrating.

- **Avoidance**

The person may try to avoid situations or things that trigger their trauma.

- **Physical symptoms**

The person may experience changes in heart rate, breathing, or muscle tension.

- **Emotional responses**

The person may experience fear, anger, sadness, or a sense of helplessness.

2. Breathing exercises

Breathwork is conscious and intentional breathing that releases trauma stored in the body. Breathwork helps with trauma processing and healing by bypassing the conscious mind, deactivating the sympathetic nervous system, and having a restorative effect on its practitioners.

- **Simple breathing exercise (diaphragmatic breathing)**

You can perform this exercise as often as needed. It can be done standing up, sitting down, or lying down. If you find it difficult or believe it's making you anxious or panicky, stop for now. Try it again in a day or so and build up the time gradually.

- Inhale slowly and deeply through your nose, keep your shoulders relaxed, your abdomen should expand, and your chest should rise very little.
- Exhale slowly through your mouth. As you blow air out, purse your lips slightly, but keep your jaw relaxed. There may be a soft “whooshing” sound as you exhale. Make the exhale longer than the inhale.
- Do this for several minutes until you start to feel better.

- **Box breathing**

Also known as four-square breathing. Box breathing is very simple to learn and practice.

- Exhale for a count of four.
- Hold your lungs empty for a four count.
- Inhale for a count of four.
- Hold the air in your lungs for a count of four.
- Repeat the pattern.

- **4-7-8 breathing**

The 4-7-8 breathing exercise, also called the relaxing breath, acts as a natural tranquilizer for the nervous system. At first, it's best to perform this exercise seated with your back straight.

- Place and keep the tip of your tongue against the ridge of tissue behind your upper front teeth for the duration of the exercise.
- Completely exhale through your mouth, making a “whooshing” sound.
- Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of four.
- Hold your breath for a count of seven.
- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a “whooshing” sound for a count of eight.

3. Grounding techniques

After a trauma, it's normal to experience flashbacks, anxiety, and other uncomfortable symptoms. Grounding techniques help control these symptoms by turning attention away from thoughts, memories, or worries, and refocusing on the present moment.

- **Mental grounding**

This technique can help bring you back to the present moment and reduce feelings of overwhelm or anxiety by focusing on your senses, thoughts, and surroundings.

- Remind yourself of who you are and where you are.
- Describe the current environment in detail.
- Describe a favourite place in detail.
- Think in categories (i.e., ice cream flavours).
- Count backward (i.e., 100, 97, 94, 91....).

- **Physical grounding: 5 4 3 2 1**

This technique can help bring you back to the present moment and manage anxiety and stress by connecting you to your body and the physical world.

- Name five things that you can see.
- Name four things that you can hear.
- Name three things that you can feel.
- Name two things that you can smell.
- Name one thing that you can taste.

- **Mindful walking**

Mindful walking involves being fully present and aware of your surroundings and bodily sensations during a walk, rather than just passively moving from one place to another.

- Start slowly with a comfortable pace, allowing yourself to notice the sensations of your feet on the ground and the movement of your body.
- Focus on your breath, the rhythm of your breathing, inhaling and exhaling deeply.
- Engage your senses noticing the sights, sounds, smells, and textures around you.
- Be present and acknowledge any thoughts or feelings that arise but gently guide your attention back to the present moment.
- There is no need to judge whether your thoughts or feelings are “good” or “bad”.

4. Visualization

Visualization can be a helpful tool for coping with trauma by promoting relaxation, reducing stress, and fostering a sense of safety. These exercises involve creating vivid mental images to help manage difficult feelings and triggers.

- **Safe place visualisation**

Start by getting comfortable in a place where you won't be disturbed and take a couple of minutes to focus on your breathing, close your eyes, become aware of any tension in your body, and let that tension go with each out-breath. Visualisations are strengthened by engaging all your senses in building the picture in your mind's eye. If you notice any negative links or images entering your positive imagery, change the image and think of something else. Finish each visualisation by taking a few moments to bring yourself back to alertness in the "here and now".

- Imagine a place where you feel calm, peaceful, and safe. It may be a place you've been to before, somewhere you've dreamt about going to, or it could be your own creation.
- Focus on the colours in your peaceful, safe place.
- Now notice the sounds that are around you, or perhaps the silence
- Think about any smells you notice there.
- Then focus on any skin sensations - the earth beneath you, the temperature, any movement of air, anything else you can touch.
- Now, while you're in your safe place, you might choose to give it a name, a word or a phrase that you can use to bring that image back, anytime you need.
- You can choose to stay a while, just enjoying the peacefulness.
- You can leave whenever you want, just by opening your eyes and being aware of where you are now.

- **The container exercise**

The goal of this exercise isn't to store these things forever. It lets you put traumatic experiences that you want to work on later into a container for safekeeping until you're ready to deal with them.

- Create a visual image in your mind of a safe, secure place - it could be a locked filing cabinet, a box with a padlock, a bank vault, or any type of container that feels safe and secure for you.
- Imagine your traumatic memories as items and visualise yourself putting them into the container.
- Lock the box.

- You are in control of this box, you hold the key, you decide when to open it and when to close it.

Some people prefer to do this in a practical, physical way using a journal, shoebox, file folder, Post-It notes...

5. Self-compassion

Self-compassion, treating yourself with the same kindness and understanding you would offer a friend, is vital for trauma recovery, counteracting self-blame and negative self-talk, and promoting emotional regulation and resilience.

- **Practice mindfulness**

Mindfulness, the practice of being fully aware and present in the moment, is essential for self-compassion. By being self-aware, you notice your self-critical thoughts and can respond to them with kindness instead of judgment. Pay attention to the present moment. Notice your thoughts and feelings without judging them.

- **Recognize your common humanity**

Everyone faces challenges and makes mistakes—it's a part of being human. When you feel isolated, remind yourself that others have experienced similar feelings and challenges. Awareness of our common humanity helps to normalize our experiences and reduces feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Try reflecting on a difficult moment you've gone through and then consider how others might have felt in similar situations. Seeing your experience from a different perspective fosters a sense of connection and shared human experience. It makes it easier to extend the same kindness to yourself that you would offer to someone else going through the same thing.

- **Speak to yourself as you would a friend**

Treat yourself as you would treat a good friend. Use encouraging words to yourself and be understanding of what your needs are at the moment. Ask yourself questions like, "How would I comfort a friend in this situation?" or "What supportive words would I offer to someone else that I can say to myself now?"

- **Respond to challenges with compassion**

Try changing how you react to your own mistakes and setbacks. When things don't go as planned, respond with understanding and kindness. Give yourself a break instead of being hard on yourself. It's about acknowledging that not everything goes perfectly, and that's okay. If you didn't do well at a task, rather than criticizing yourself, remind yourself that you did your best and can learn from the experience.

- **Practice self-soothing**

Self-soothing is about comforting yourself in a physical and emotional sense. It's a way to show kindness and care for your own body and mind,

especially during stressful times. You practice self-soothing through activities that make you feel relaxed and cared for—like taking a warm bath, listening to soothing music, or going for a leisurely walk. Another form of self-soothing is compassionate self-touch, such as placing a hand over your heart or giving yourself a gentle hug. These physical gestures can have a powerful calming effect, helping to reduce stress, and promote feelings of safety and comfort.

6. Minimizing stress

These stress minimization strategies can help to restore a sense of calm and peace to life. They don't require a lot of time or thought but can be helpful for reducing overall stress or for providing quick relief when used in conjunction with the coping skills above.

- **Self-care**

Engage in activities that relax you and bring you joy, comfort, and fulfillment (e.g., taking a bath, reading, listening to music, volunteering/giving back to others). Avoid excessive intake of alcohol or drugs.

- **Routines**

Try to maintain normal routines for meals, exercise, and sleep. Regular physical activity can ease physical tension and releases endorphins which have mood-boosting and stress-reducing effects. Find activities you enjoy, whether it's walking, swimming, dancing, or playing a sport. A balanced diet provides the nutrients your body needs to function optimally and can positively impact mood and energy levels. Limit processed foods, sugary drinks, and excessive caffeine, and focus on whole foods, fruits, vegetables, and lean protein. Aim for 7-9 hours of quality sleep per night. Establish a consistent bedtime and wake-up time, and create a relaxing pre-sleep routine.

- **Mindfulness**

Practice mindfulness techniques to ground yourself in the present moment and reduce the impact of intrusive thoughts.

- **Social support**

Reach out to friends, family, and colleagues. Surrounding yourself with caring and understanding people can counteract the negative impact of trauma and foster a sense of belonging.

- **Cognitive-behaviour therapy**

Catching, Checking, and Changing describe practical steps for identifying and challenging negative or unhelpful thoughts and behaviours and replacing them with more realistic and balanced ones.

- **Seek professional support**

Recognize the limitations of your own coping strategies and know when you need additional support from a therapist or counsellor who specializes in trauma. Help is available.