

Coping with Trauma

Victim Support is here to support you, your family, whānau and friends.

We hope you will find this information helpful.

Call us on **0800 842 846** to be connected with a Support Worker who can provide practical help and information, emotional support, and referral to other services at this difficult time. We're available 24/7.

here
for
you

What is Trauma?

A traumatic event or ongoing situation is one that is frightening and overwhelming when we experience or witness it.

An event or situation can also be traumatic for us if someone we love and care about has been affected by it.

During traumatic times, our brain instinctively tries to keep us safe from harm. Afterwards our brain tries to make sense of what's happened. This process is normal. People of all ages can be affected by trauma and often will experience some strong reactions, both immediately and in the days that follow, until the brain stops being on full alert and rebalances.

Each person's experience will be different, because we're all different. There are some common reactions to trauma that are helpful to know about. Such reactions will usually gradually decrease as you adjust to what's happened, and as you get some good support and rest. You're not losing your mind or going crazy. It can often be difficult for those who weren't involved to understand what you're going through. Perhaps you could show them this information and chat with them about what it's like for you right now.

“ Trauma reactions can be hard to deal with for a time, but they're normal reactions to an abnormal event.

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Trauma Reactions

Trauma affects every part of us – physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and the way we socially interact with others. It's not just a passing emotion. Here are some examples of common reactions to a traumatic event or situation:

Physical

- a racing heart rate – palpitations, chest pains, increased blood pressure
- breathing fast – hard to take a deep breath, dizzy
- trembling and unsteady – need to sit or lie down
- crying – sobbing, tearful, screaming
- tense muscles - tight chest, hard to swallow, headaches
- nauseous – going to the toilet more often, diarrhoea, constipation
- tired – exhausted, lack of energy
- wired – restless, wanting to move, bursts of energy
- sleep problems – sleeping less or more, hard to get to sleep, waking often, nightmares
- appetite changes – eating less or more
- hot and sweating or cold and shaky
- existing health conditions worsen
- falling ill more easily
- clumsier and more accident prone
- decreased interest in sex

Mental

- things can seem a blur – can't remember details, brain fog
- hard to focus or concentrate – preoccupied, distracted, slow thinking
- forgetful – can't take information in easily
- continually on alert – hypervigilant, looking for more possible threats
- difficulty making decisions or planning
- disturbing memories or thoughts come into your mind a lot – they may keep playing on loop, such as "What if I had done x, y or z, instead?"
- distressing flashbacks – "reliving" the experience, including having physical reactions to the vivid memories (See **Managing Flashbacks**, <https://victimsupport.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Flashbacks-Info-Sheet-20.12.19-by-Tandem-Road.pdf> information sheet on Victim Support's website.)
- extremely sensitive to any sounds, smells, tastes, sensations or sights that trigger bad memories

Emotional

- shocked – disbelieving, confused, feeling numb, as if things are unreal
- helpless and despairing – feeling things are out of control, overwhelmed, feeling vulnerable
- worried, anxious, fearful – anxious about your safety and others', uncertain what will happen next, jumpy, on edge, agitated, possibly experiencing panic attacks
- avoidance of thoughts and emotions – finding reminders too difficult to cope with
- irritable and angry – short-tempered and reactive, sudden outbursts, anger or fury at who caused it or "allowed it to happen", increased levels of aggression
- blaming – yourself or others for what happened, possibly blaming God
- guilty – such as, for not doing more to prevent it or not behaving as you would have liked
- ashamed – embarrassed it's happened to you/someone you love, lowered self-esteem
- sad and grieving – for loss, the harm done, death, serious injuries, or damage to homes and property, for how things were before
- negative thinking, depressed – feeling hopeless, suicidal thoughts

Spiritual

- questioning why has this happened?
- looking for meaning in what's happened
- finding it harder to know what or who to trust now
- moving towards or away from faith beliefs
- looking to forebears, our tūpuna/ancestors for guidance

Behavioural

- withdrawing from/avoiding others, or needing to be with/near others more than usual
- avoiding certain locations, people, or situations
- becoming extra safety conscious and wanting to check where loved ones are through the day
- tense relationships, increased arguing and conflict with others
- avoiding work, loss of interest in doing things usually enjoyed
- wanting to work more, intentionally keeping very busy
- increased use of alcohol, cigarettes or drugs, or increased risk-taking

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Trauma centres on fear, while grief centres on sadness and loss

At the same time your brain is processing the trauma, it's very likely that it has also activated the grief process.

This second process is designed to help you adjust to the changes and losses the traumatic event has caused. In other words, there can be two brain processes underway at the same time. There is some overlap of reactions, but the centre of trauma's reactions is dealing with the fear and threat, while the centre focus of grief's reactions is sadness and loss. Please see Victim Support's information sheet **When You Are Grieving**, https://victimsupport.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/When-you-are-grieving_MASTER_21-April.pdf for more about grief and how it can add to the trauma experience.

“ You are experiencing normal reactions to a distressing event. Your brain is trying to process what's happened and get back into balance, but this takes time. Often longer than most expect. The greater the trauma, the greater the impact.

What can I do?

A traumatic event can turn life upside down. There is no simple fix that can make things better right away, but there are some steps you can take to help you feel more in control of things.

- ✓ **Give yourself some time to adjust.** This will be an up and down time for a while. Be patient with yourself, and others. Your recovery will take the time it needs to take.
- ✓ **Do what's worked for you before in hard and stressful times.** Put those positive things into action again. Avoid those things that didn't work.
- ✓ **Keep up a daily routine as much as possible.** Even simple routines help us feel more in control of things.
- ✓ **Keep connected with others.** Regularly talk with, text or message those you know to keep in touch with them. Spend time with those who care about you.
- ✓ **Make looking after yourself a top priority.** Eat healthy and drink plenty of water. Keep active because exercise lifts mood and keeps you well. Get plenty of rest and sleep. See your GP if sleep becomes an ongoing problem. Avoid excessive use of alcohol and don't use drugs.
- ✓ **Accept support from trusted people** who care and can help in practical ways and provide emotional support.
- ✓ **If possible, talk with others who've been through the same or a similar situation.** It often helps to talk with those who 'get it', when you feel ready to.
- ✓ **Several times each day, take slow, deep belly breaths in and out.** An easy but powerful way to calm down and feel more in control.
- ✓ **Avoid excessive use alcohol and don't use drugs.** This could negatively affect well-being and delay recovery.
- ✓ **If what happened to you is in the media,** limit the time you listen, watch or read about it.
- ✓ **If you are also supporting others who have been affected,** such as children, young people, relatives, friends, neighbours, or workmates, remember they will each react in their own ways. Contact Victim Support for links and resources that could help you with this.
- ✓ **Don't hesitate to reach out for extra help when you realise you need it.** The stress and disruption that trauma can cause can often be overwhelming for people and too much to handle alone. Use your support circle of relatives, friends, neighbours, workmates, and other caring people around you. Talk to your GP or a counsellor about your trauma reactions and ways to recover well.
- ✓ **Sometimes trauma reactions can be so severe that a person develops a serious condition called PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder).** In this situation a person definitely needs professional skill and support to diagnose their condition and help them get onto the road to recovery. Visiting a GP and talking with them honestly about what's been going on is a wise first step.

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Seek professional help and support if...

- Any of the reactions listed earlier are particularly intense or overwhelming for you, such as flashbacks, high levels of ongoing anxiety, or panic attacks.
- You develop an illness or have an injury from the traumatic event.
- You realise you are struggling to cope most days.
- You have no one you want to talk to about your experience and reactions to it but would like to talk to someone else.
- After a few weeks or months, your trauma reactions are not easing up, if they are intensifying, or if their effects are dominating your daily life and causing you and/or others concern.
- You are becoming dependent on regularly using alcohol or drugs to cope.
- You think you may have developed depression.
- You're feeling hopeless and are having thoughts of self-harm or of suicide.
- You have serious concerns about how your family, whānau, friends, neighbours, or workmates are coping and about their current mental health and well-being.

“ Naku te rourou nau te rourou ka ora ai te iwi

*With your basket and my basket
the people will live*

How can Victim Support help?

- ✓ Call us on **0800 842 846** to be connected with a Support Worker who can provide practical help and information, emotional support, and referral to other services at this difficult time. We're available 24/7.
- ✓ Ask your Support Worker about how Victim Support can connect you with a professional counsellor in your community, and any financial support to help you with this.

Other places you can call to get help:

- ✓ Call or text the 24/7 *Need to Talk* helpline on **1737** to speak with a counsellor.
- ✓ Call a local helpline, e.g. Youthline (**0800 376 633** or free text **234**) or Lifeline (**0800 543 354**).
- ✓ Call Healthline about health concerns on **0800 611 116**, (24/7).