

AAFDA

Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse



AVA

Against Violence & Abuse

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COPING WITH TRAUMA

help@aafda.org.uk
07768 386 922

aafda.org.uk
@AAFDA6

TRAUMA

Trauma can change the way we think about things, the way we remember things, the way we feel about things and how we act. The most important thing for you to remember today is that you're not crazy or going mad! There are very real reactions to trauma but these are processes that show your body and mind is trying to adapt, survive and come to terms with what has happened to you.



Sometimes our reactions can feel overwhelming or out of control; we can feel too much or not enough, we can have very specific intrusive memories or vague sensations that don't feel linked to anything. Sometimes it's very easy to link how we are feeling to what's happened to us and other times it feels like it's completely out of nowhere.



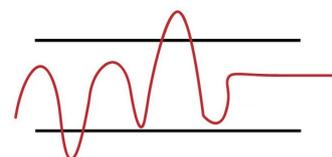
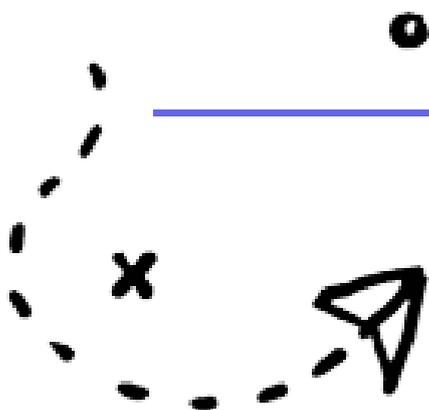
HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M TRAUMATISED?

Trauma response can vary significantly in line with your age but some of the noticeable emotional and physical symptoms are:

- Reliving the trauma
- Sleeping difficulties
- Problems concentrating
- Nightmares connected to the trauma
- Thoughts that break through or interrupt what you were thinking or doing – sometimes these are pictures or sensations and can be literal memories or disjointed memories
- Expectation of future catastrophe
- Always being prepared for something negative to happen/feeling a tense and anxious dread (hyper vigilance)
- No longer feeling pleasure doing activities you used to enjoy
- Feeling low energy and demotivated
- Feeling that you are to blame for the traumatic incident
- Misdirected anger, might be towards yourself, might be towards 'safe' family and peers and might be expressed in physical or verbal ways.

When we try to make sense of these feelings and the associated behaviours, it can be useful to think about them in that fight/flight/freeze/flop framework.* It's important to remember that there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to feel or react and although some of the behaviours are more noticeable or tolerable to other people they all come from the same traumatic events and need to be treated with understanding.

*Take a look at The Window of Tolerance at - www.nicabm.com



FIGHT

This is sometimes called the red zone.

HOW IT FEELS IN YOUR BODY

When you're in the red zone you get ready to attack, you release lots of adrenaline to prepare your body, your pupils get bigger, your breathing changes, and your heart starts to pump really fast. You might notice your shoulders rising or your fists clenching. You are preparing to defend yourself.

SOOTHING TIPS

The trick here is to release the energy created in your body.

Don't underestimate the power of talking to people about how you feel.

Vigorous exercise can help utilise and release the energy created - running, dancing, punching sofa cushions...

Some people like to sing loudly or listen to 'angry' music.

LINKED BEHAVIOURS

Often behaviour is about releasing emotions and sensations. You might want to shout, break things, hurt yourself or other people.

KEY WORDS, EMOTIONS, THOUGHTS

- Angry
- Furious
- Frustrated
- Hot
- "It's not fair"
- Wild.



FLIGHT

This is the yellow zone, sometimes this zone can give us information about how we are feeling that can help us avoid the red or blue zones.

HOW IT FEELS IN YOUR BODY

In this zone your body prepares to run away, your digestion shuts down, your mouth goes dry, you might get differences in your vision or other senses. You are mobilising to move quickly and effectively.

SOOTHING TIPS

Anything to help relax and ground you and bring your problem solving mind back online. Games like Tetris, Snake or word searches can be helpful.

Sorting things like Lego or puzzles can really help sooth the nervous system.

Anything that absorbs and distracts you - colouring, yoga, walking, baking, gardening.

LINKED BEHAVIOURS

You might startle easily, be jumpy, distracted, unable to focus even on things that you want to, unable to settle, you might feel teary at unexpected things. Thoughts might feel very busy and out of control.

KEY WORDS, EMOTIONS, THOUGHTS

- Panic
- Anxiety
- Trapped
- Sense that you're being watched and a need to get away
- Startled
- Frightened
- On edge.



FREEZE

We talk about freeze as the blue zone - everything slows down and your body shuts down to protect you.

HOW IT FEELS IN YOUR BODY

Your body releases an amazing cocktail of pain killing hormones to freeze and protect you from injury or harm. It can make you feel out of touch with your body or thoughts or feelings. You might find yourself holding your breath or closing your eyes.

KEY WORDS, EMOTIONS, THOUGHTS

- Numb
- Cold
- Disconnected
- Disassociated
- Hiding
- Detached
- Still
- Overwhelmed.

LINKED BEHAVIOURS

Many people find a range of behaviours to help them manage this state - pain or injury is common. Any behaviour that works with or against the altered state in the body to bring relief and combat the 'dead' feeling inside.

SOOTHING TIPS

This state can be very distressing. Strategies here are individual and best discussed with a caregiver or therapist. Together you need to find ways to help you 'thaw' - slowly coming into the here and now.

We will provide you with grounding techniques for you to practice to help you avoid total shut down.

Strategies you need here are about comforting yourself, reminding yourself that the trauma has passed and that you are safe.

Friends and family can play a role in helping you reconnect to the present.



FEELING OKAY

In an ideal world we'd spend all of our time here in the green zone.

HOW IT FEELS IN YOUR BODY

Your body will feel relaxed, shoulders down, easy to smile, your tummy will feel comfortable, your breathing normal, and heart rate regular.

LINKED BEHAVIOURS

You'll feel able to take in information, be connected to friends and family and have a strong understanding of what's going on around you.

KEY WORDS, EMOTIONS, THOUGHTS

- Calm
- Confident
- Collected.

SOOTHING TIPS

This is the best time to practice strategies for when you're in the other states. Practice visualisations, mindfulness or meditation to develop tools to support you when you feel traumatised.



GROUND STRATEGIES

Regardless of where in the trauma framework your behaviours are coming from all can be soothed by grounding strategies. Grounding strategies are a range of tips and tricks you can use when you feel overwhelmed to help you feel safe and in the moment. Trauma symptoms often make you think the trauma is happening to you now, grounding strategies can help you to remember that the trauma is in the past and that in the present moment you are safe.

Grounding strategies can feel quite unfamiliar, they are tools that need practicing when you feel 'green'/okay. Practising and learning them when you feel okay will make them more effective for you when you feel out of control or disconnected.

Alongside being unfamiliar they can seem too simple and straight forward to make any real difference but survivors tell us that they can bring great relief, it is worth giving them a try. You could ask a care-giver or friend to help you practice, they are really good strategies for everyone.

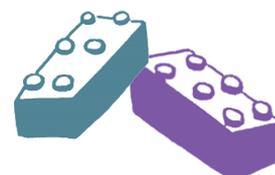
Breathing

One of the things you'll notice is how trauma reactions change the way you breath. Your breath is one of your body's most basic survival mechanisms and because it happens automatically it is easy to forget that you have complete control over it.

When you are feeling 'red' you can use your breath to expel strong feelings. Practice breathing in deeply for a count of five and then let your breath go in five quick breaths. Try two or three times.

When you are feeling 'yellow' your breath might be coming in short gasps and it might feel like you can't get enough breath. In these situations try focusing on the out breath - blow out your breath in a slow exhale like blowing on a dandelion clock. You should find that if you can lengthen your out breath your in breath becomes slower and more manageable. This can help calm down your whole body.

When you're feeling 'blue' it's likely that your breath will likely be very slow, focus on drawing in breath, breath in for a count of four and hold it before letting it out slowly. Imagine taking in enough air ready to blow out a candle. Repeat up to ten times in order to feel 'green'.



Using other senses

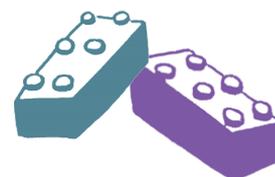
One of the things that is striking about trauma is how it impacts on the senses. It can make your senses very powerful.

Most trauma survivors find that their sense of smell is impacted by their experiences. Smells can be something that brings to life frightening or other overwhelming feelings and memories. It can be useful to try to keep a list of smells to avoid. It can also be a really useful tool for day to day survival. Many smells have properties that can wake us up or calm us down. Smell is linked to feelings of trust, safety and comfort and using smell in a way that helps you manage daily life can be really effective but is highly personal. One domestic abuse survivor found that carrying with her a bottle of her favourite perfume helped her when she felt like she could only manage at home. Lavender is a well know relaxing scent, while citrus scents are good at helping you feel more alert. Experiment with what works and when – the same scent that helps you relax enough to fall asleep might be awful when you're trying to focus in the classroom or at work but you might find different scents for different purposes.

Eyes and vision

For those with typical vision, using your eyes to give you clues about the present is really useful, touching things can be a good substitute with support of a care-giver. Try combining the breathing exercises above with a visual clue, you could practice thinking: "I feel red – I'm going to find five red things to look at or touch in this room". You could use the rainbow to catalogue things in the room, looking first for a red something, an orange something etc... working through the colours until you feel calmer, safer and in control.

Often when people feel lost in their traumatic memories or sensations they close their eyes and go inwards, opening your eyes and talking out loud about what you can see can bring you back into the present more effectively than any other strategy. When you are talking to yourself try to keep your voice soft and kind – like you were talking to a pet or a small child.



Using your body

Your body is your anchor to the here and now. You can deploy strategies to help feel connected to the present in safe and non-threatening ways. Tiny adjustments in your body can have massive impacts on how we feel. You could experiment with any of the following ideas to help you build your soothing strategies

- Try moving your fingers and toes in conjunction with breathing - squeeze your toes or fists together when you breathe in and relax them as you breathe out.
- Rubbing moisturiser or hand cream into our hands can be soothing, especially when combined with a favourite scent.
- Shaking your hands out as hard as you can for 45 seconds can release tension and encourage a wave of calm to flow up your arms to your shoulders and jaws.
- Just telling yourself to relax your shoulders and jaws can help you feel more collected.
- 'Body scans' on the meditation tools listed in the resources section can help you relax different groups of muscles and can be really helpful if you struggle to sleep.

