

Trauma may occur from a single experience or repeated or multiple experiences. Traumatic experiences are generally those that you are unprepared for, are unexpected, and out of your control. They are often frightening and physically and mentally threatening. They overwhelm your ability to cope and can have a profound impact on your identity, mind, and body.

Trauma is the experience you have of an event and the meaning you make of it, not the event itself. The trigger event for trauma may be childhood abuse or neglect, family or partner violence, an accident, a serious illness or medical procedure, a difficult childbirth, an act of violence, natural disasters, war, or displacement from home or culture.

What causes trauma?

A dangerous or stressful event triggers your flight, fight or freeze response, your normal, natural response to danger and stress. Your body floods with stress hormones and prepares to fight, run away or “play dead”, to keep itself safe.

With lower degrees of stress or danger your body can quickly resolve itself to its normal hormonal and physical functioning after the stress or danger has passed, and your emotional response settles over time as the mind processes, integrates and makes sense of the experience.

When the event is particularly frightening or distressing your stress response and the impacts from it may not resolve quickly. Your mind takes longer to integrate and process information about the event and your body may stay in a high stress response state for an extended period. As a coping mechanism you may block the event from your memory, or try to avoid reminders of it. This may delay processing and integration of the experience, and the trauma may be experienced as ever-present or “flashbacks” and memories may intrude later on.

How will you react?

Everyone reacts differently to trauma, and experience a wide range of physical and emotional responses. Sometimes signs of trauma won't

appear until months or years after an event. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to think, feel, or respond – whatever your response is, it is normal.

Signs of trauma that you may experience include:

Physical

- Excessive alertness and being easily startled
- Racing heartbeat
- Restlessness and agitation
- Fatigue/exhaustion
- Insomnia and nightmares
- Muscle tension, aches, and pains

Cognitive

- Disorientation and confusion
- Poor concentration and memory
- Intrusive thoughts and visual images of the event

Emotional

- Shock, fear, anger, guilt, and shame
- Sadness/hopelessness
- Irritability and mood swings
- Numbness and detachment
- Anxiety and panic

Behavioural

- Withdrawal from others
- Avoidance of places or activities that are reminders of the event
- Loss of interest in normal activities

What you can do during recovery

Get moving. Trauma can keep your body in a state of high stress response for an extended period – your stress response gets “stuck” on high alert. Exercise decreases the level of stress hormones in your body and increases “happy hormones” such as endorphins. By moving you are letting your body know that the danger has passed and it can start bringing itself back to a normal balance.

Don't isolate yourself. Following a traumatic experience, you may want to withdraw from others, but this can make it harder to heal. You may not want to talk about the trauma but try to see people face to face, share how you are feeling, and engage in "normal" social activity. Being engaged and connected to others can help you better process the traumatic experience.

Soothe yourself. Relaxation and calming techniques can help relieve the physical, cognitive, and emotional symptoms of trauma. Find which techniques work best for you and practice them regularly. Try mindful breathing – counting your breaths as you focus your attention on them. Try a progressive relaxation technique. Use sensations such as specific sights, smells, and tastes to help you feel calm. You may find listening to music, having a nice bath, or playing with your pet relaxes you. Be present, notice five things around you that you can see, hear and smell – bringing your attention away from your thoughts even momentarily relieves your mind and body.

Acknowledge your feelings. Allow yourself to feel your emotions, and accept them as important for the healing process. Allow your feelings to be present without completely overwhelming you. Use your soothing techniques to help you take action when you need to even when you're having difficult feelings. Expressing your feelings, whether sharing your feelings with someone else, or writing them down in a diary, can also help.

Be healthy. A healthy body helps you to better cope and process trauma. Eat well and regularly. Try to get eight hours of sleep each night – going to bed and getting up at the same time each day can help when you are having trouble sleeping. Avoid alcohol and drugs as these can intensify the symptoms of trauma.

Don't take on too much. Although it's important to spend time with others, be active, and look after yourself, you also need time to think about things and process the experience. Don't push yourself too hard to get back into your old routine or to start new things. Give yourself space and time.

When to seek professional help

Recovery from a traumatic experience can take days, weeks, or months, depending on the severity and nature of the event. Symptoms gradually fade as you process and integrate the trauma. Even when you're feeling better, you may experience painful memories or emotions – especially in response to triggers such as the anniversary of the event.

Sometimes the traumatic event can be so distressing, and the ensuing reactions so severe, that professional assistance may be needed. Seek help if:

- You are having trouble functioning at home or work
- You are suffering from severe, ongoing emotions such as sadness, anger, fear or anxiety
- You are having difficulties with relationships
- You are emotionally numb and disconnected from others
- You continue to experience disturbing memories, nightmares and flashbacks
- You are avoiding more and more things that remind you of the trauma
- You are using drugs or alcohol excessively to feel better

If you are concerned about a friend or family member, look for signs of trauma, talk with them about what's going on, listen to their experience, and seek help together.

Support is available for all JCU students. Contact JCU Student Equity and Wellbeing <https://www.jcu.edu.au/student-equity-and-wellbeing>

Further information and support

- Understanding and managing psychological trauma
http://www.psychology.org.au/publications/tip_sheets/trauma/
- Dealing with the effects of trauma – a self-help guide
<https://www.unh.edu/pacs/dealing-effects-trauma-%E2%80%93-self-help-guide>
- Understanding trauma – for young people
<https://headspace.org.au/young-people/understanding-trauma-for-young-people/>

Student Equity and Wellbeing

James Cook University

Web <https://www.jcu.edu.au/student-equity-and-wellbeing>

Email studentwellbeing@jcu.edu.au

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