

How the Body responds to Trauma

The human body is built to protect people from danger. The body goes through a similar process whether it is faced with a home intruder, a war, physical or sexual abuse, an approaching bushfire, or any other extreme threat. Many people question how they reacted to a dangerous situation, after it happened. Often trauma survivors blame themselves for not acting differently at the time of the trauma and may experience shame or guilt about it. Others are confused by the difficulties they experience in coping after the trauma ends.

When we learn more about how the body functions, our reactions start to make sense.

Our Bodies Reactions to Immediate Danger

When we are under threat or in danger, our bodies have a system that prepares us to fight or flee from the danger as a way of surviving. Once the brain has detected danger, it signals the body and muscles are then tensed, the heart beats faster and chemicals such as adrenalin are released into the blood. This response happens in less than a second. This system has kept humans alive from predators for centuries and is the same system that attempts to keep us safe in modern times.

However, when the danger becomes overwhelming, we are terrified and there is no hope of escape, the body 'shuts down' and freezes. A person may pass out, go limp or take their mind elsewhere. It is a natural response in situations where humans feel powerless or hopeless. They may not feel the pain of the attack and may not have clear memories of the event. Memories from trauma are stored in the brain in a different way to other memories so often seem sketchy, confusing and disordered at a later date. The freeze response is not a conscious decision, it is an automatic body response over which we have no control.



Image by tcatcarson; morgueFile

All of these reactions are common, normal, automatic and happen for both adults and children. They are designed for survival- to keep us alive.

When the danger has passed, there is another system in our body that is designed to 'reset' itself back to a calm 'baseline'. The brain tells the body there is no danger and it can relax now. Different chemicals are released into the blood to calm the system. Yawning, stretching and sighing are all part of the system to calm the body.

These two systems are designed to work together in our bodies to keep us safe when there is danger and to relax us when we are safe.

Our Bodies Reactions over Time

When we are exposed to repeated danger (such as repeated sexual abuse), changes in the brain occur and the fear response can become 'trapped' in our body. The brain can become 'stuck on', expecting something bad to happen, constantly looking out for danger and preparing the body to fight or flee. This can show up as anxiety, panic attacks, OCD, chronic pain and other challenges.

Or a person can become 'stuck off', which means the brain and body shut down. This can appear as depression, lethargy, exhaustion, chronic fatigue and other symptoms.

Some people can stay either stuck on high alert or stuck off, while others can constantly swing between being stuck on high alert to shutting off. All of these can be exhausting.



Image by emlyn; morgueFile

Small, everyday things in the environment can 'trigger' the brain into a fight-flight-freeze trauma response. A trigger is a reminder of the original danger. It is like the original trauma is happening all over again. Different people are triggered by different things. Some things are more predictable as triggers. For example, someone who was sexually abused as a child may find having a medical examination of their body to be a trigger. Other triggers are less obvious. A trigger can be a sound, a smell, a time of year, certain words, being in a room alone with someone, physical touch or a range of other things. Being triggered can cause someone to fight (become physically or verbally aggressive), to flee (run away) or to freeze (shut down, zone out). They can react as if the original trauma is happening, even if there is no danger at all. It is an unconscious response and out of the person's control. It can be frightening for both the person experiencing it and any onlookers, particularly for those who don't understand how trauma affects the brain and the body.

Living life in this traumatised state can be both exhausting and debilitating too. Many people turn to drugs and alcohol or other self-harming acts to try to cope. These attempts often result in adding other challenges, and don't resolve the real problem.

It can be a huge relief for people who have survived trauma to hear that their responses are normal and to learn more about why they behave the way they do. It is also reassuring to know that these challenges don't need to be permanent- people can heal from trauma experiences and change the way they function in everyday life.



Common Difficulties

Trauma survivors can form belief systems as a result of repeated feelings of powerless, despair and desperation associated with the trauma. They may, for example, believe “I am worthless”, “I am to blame for what happened”, “I’m not a good person”, “I am not deserving of happiness” or “more bad things will happen to me”. These beliefs often govern our feelings, thoughts and behaviours and can originate from judging the way we responded to the original trauma. That is why it is essential to learn about the human body’s natural reactions to trauma.

Although trauma survivors have survived the original trauma, the trauma experience often lives on inside them and creates other difficulties. Trauma that was caused by another person, especially a trusted person, can often lead to difficulties for the survivor in trusting others and forming long term, healthy relationships. Trauma experiences that involved sexual violence often lead to difficulties with intimacy and sex. Trauma survivors also commonly experience low self esteem, a range of mental health issues and various health issues.

Helpful Strategies for Trauma Survivors

Healing from trauma can take time. The brain needs to learn that trauma experiences from the past are no longer a threat. The body needs to learn new, healthier ways of coping when it feels stressed.

Some things you may find helpful.

- In order to heal from trauma, and find a solution to any difficulties you are experiencing, you need to be safe first. If you are currently at risk of violence of any kind, get help to address the situation.
- Positive connections with other people are important. Make sure you have some supportive, understanding people in your life.
- Find an experienced trauma counsellor to assist you. It is important that you feel safe with the worker and you connect with them. If not, it is okay to try a different worker. Think about what you would like to get out of counselling- what are your goals?
- Identify things/situations that trigger you. Minimise coming into contact with triggers when you can.
- Notice the warning signs from your body when you are triggered or becoming stressed. Pay attention to your body at various times each day. Notice if you feel any tingling, heat, tension, strange sensations.
- Develop a plan for when you feel triggered- where will you go that you feel safe? What will you do to help bring your body back to baseline?
- Practice calming strategies daily (e.g. grounding, breathing) and find some that work for you (see other SARC handouts).
- Take notice of your senses each day. For example, notice the taste of the foods you eat, the sounds around you, the feel of your clothing, the colours of the sky at sunset, the smell of the gardens.
- Notice the messages you tell yourself in your mind. Are they mostly negative or positive? Find some positive, encouraging messages you can tell yourself each day and in times when you are struggling. For example “I am strong, I can do this”, “I am a good person, “I deserve to be happy”, “I am safe”.
- Consider connecting with other trauma survivors either in person (e.g. a survivors’ group) or through an online forum.
- Take care of yourself on a daily basis. For example eat healthily, exercise regularly, do something relaxing each day.
- Be kind to yourself and patient with your progress. You will have good times and bad ahead. Healing and change takes time.

Remember- you are important and you can recover and heal from your trauma experiences and lead the happy, fulfilling life you deserve.

The Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)

SARC offers support services for both recent and past sexual assault and sexual abuse.

The SARC 24-hour Emergency Telephone Line provides access to an experienced counsellor and doctor for people who have been sexually assaulted during the past 14 days.

Free counselling is available for past sexual assault and sexual abuse

(08) 6458 1828 or 1800 199 888 (freecall from a landline)

