



Coping with trauma

Being involved in a traumatic event can be very frightening and it is not surprising that most children and young people will be upset for a few days afterwards. This leaflet explains how you can help yourself to deal with what happened.

Reactions

You might notice a number of changes after the trauma and find that:

- You can't stop thinking about it
- There are times when it feels like the trauma is happening all over again
- You have difficulty sleeping at nights and bad dreams
- You get very frightened or upset by things that remind you about it
- You feel angry or irritable with friends and family
- You might not want to think or talk about what happened
- You might not want to go out or be with other people

For most people, these changes last only a couple of weeks although some children find that they last longer. If this happens, you might want to try some of these ideas to see if they help. They don't always work but if you practice enough there will be some times when they make you feel better and more in control.

Stopping trauma

Thoughts and pictures

There may be times when you can't stop thinking about your trauma. Thoughts and memories may keep going round and round in your head like a videotape that you can't switch off. You may find that this happens more when you're not very busy or if something reminds you about what happened. You could try to control your thoughts by teaching yourself to think about something else. Rather than listening to worrying thoughts about what happened, you can learn how to switch off the videotape. You can do this in different ways, so try to see what works for you.

Describe what you see

Describe to yourself in a lot of detail what is going on around you. Describe what you see as quickly as you can and think about colours, shapes, sizes, textures and what things are made of, for instance. By concentrating on the things you see you stop thinking about the trauma. You will need to practice and remember that it probably won't work straight away.

Thinking puzzles

You may want to squeeze out trauma memories by setting yourself thinking puzzles. You could do this in lots of ways, for instance:

- Counting backwards from 123 in 9s
- Spelling the names of your family backwards

- Name the records of your favourite group
- Naming all the players in your favourite sports team

The puzzles have to be hard enough to challenge you and make you think, so don't make them too easy.

Activities

Some people find that activities are a good way of switching off. The idea is that the activity takes over and drowns out any thoughts or memories about the trauma. When you notice that you are thinking about what happened, try one of the activities you find helpful, for instance:

- Crosswords or other puzzles
- Reading
- Watching TV
- Listening to music

The more you concentrate on what you are doing, the more you drown out any thoughts about the frightening event.

Turn off the video

Imagine a picture of a video player and concentrate hard on it. Imagine yourself putting a tape or disc in the machine and turning on the video player. As you turn it on, the video will start and you will see the pictures of your chosen video. Now imagine yourself turning off the video. Really concentrate on the 'off' switch and as you touch it, notice how the video stops. Practice turning on and off the video in your mind and when the video starts playing pictures of your trauma, imagine yourself turning off the video and watch the screen go blank.

Write down your worries

You may have lots of memories about the trauma and see pictures of it time and time again. Some people have a different sort of memory and feel responsible, guilty, angry or somehow to blame for what happened. These

thoughts are very troubling and because no one hears or questions them, they tend to stay racing around in your head. Sometimes it is useful to empty out your head and clear these thoughts away. Seeing them written down on paper can help you to think more clearly and make you feel better.

- Write down all your thoughts and worries about what happened
- Scrunch up the paper tightly and throw it in the bin

Sleeping

Night time can be difficult as it is often the time when thoughts about the trauma seem to happen most. The more you listen to the thoughts, the worse they seem to become. It can help to try to break out of this cycle with some of the ideas below.

Settling at night

A relaxing night time routine may help you to fall asleep more easily and give you less chance to think about what happened. Thinking about the things that help you relax and see if they can become part of your night time routine:

- Have a quiet 'wind down' time before going to bed
- A warm drink or bath may make you feel relaxed
- A comfortable room that is not too hot or too cold
- Leave the light on if it helps
- Put the radio or TV on a timer switch so that they turn off after you're asleep
- If you find it takes a long time to fall asleep then try to go to bed later. Staying up later might help you to settle more quickly.





Waking at night and bad dreams

Sometimes you might find that you wake in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep again. This is a time when you may be troubled by your thoughts about what happened. The more you listen to the thoughts the worse you feel. It can be helpful to try to concentrate on something else:

- Put on your personal stereo and play some of your favourite music. If you fall asleep the machine will turn itself off
- Try reading a chapter of a book or a magazine for a few minutes to help you settle down.

Learn to relax

There are lots of different ways to relax and you will need to find out what works best for you. Here are some ideas:

Controlled breathing

There are times when you may suddenly start to tense or get worked up and won't have time to go through any relaxation exercises. Controlled breathing is a quick method to help you gain control and relax. You can do it anywhere and often people don't notice what you're doing.

- Slowly draw in a deep breath
- Hold it for five seconds
- Slowly let it out
- As you breathe out, say to yourself "relax"

Doing this a few times will help you regain control of your body and help you feel calmer.

Calming pictures

With this method, you can make yourself feel more pleasant by thinking about those things you find nice or restful. Try thinking about your dream place. It could be somewhere you

have been or your fantasy. Conjure up a picture of it in your mind, making the picture as restful and tranquil as possible. Try to make the picture as real as you can, thinking about:

- the noise of the waves crashing on the beach
- the wind blowing in the trees
- the smell of the sea
- the feel of the sun on your face.

Practise imagining your dream place so you can easily turn on the picture if you start to feel unpleasant.

Physical exercise

Some people find that physical exercise is a helpful way to relax. If physical exercise works for you then use it. Any sort of physical exercise can help, for instance, a good run, a brisk walk or a swim can help to get rid of angry or anxious feelings. If possible, it may be particularly useful to try at those times you notice strong unpleasant feelings.

Facing your fears

You may find that you become very worried about things that remind you of your trauma. You may become very worried if you go past the place where it happened, or if you are reminded about events or people involved. This is very understandable and most people feel like this for a short time afterwards. For others this feeling becomes very strong and may stop you doing the things you would really like to do.

- You may give up trying to do things
- You might become reluctant to try anything new
- You might avoid situations you think will be difficult

When this happens, you need to face your fears and learn to overcome them. The following ideas might help.

Practice being successful

When faced with difficult challenges, we often think that we will not be successful. We are very good at predicting failure and thinking that things will go wrong. Thinking like this means that you will feel more anxious and more reluctant to try.

- A useful way forward is to imagine a picture of your challenge in your mind and to talk yourself through what will happen.
- Think about the steps involved and imagine coping and being successful.
- Make your picture as real as possible and describe your scene in lots of detail.

Practising this a few times will help you to recognise that while it might be difficult, you can be successful.

Small steps

Sometimes challenges seem too big to tackle in one go. At these times it might be useful to break down the task into smaller steps. Someone who is very frightened about travelling in a car might, for example, break this down into smaller steps like these:

- Sit for a minute in a stationary car
- Sit in a stationary car with the engine running
- Go for a very short ride on a quiet road
- Go for a slightly longer ride on a quiet road
- Go for a short ride on a busier road
- Go for a longer ride

Because each step is small, it increases the chance of success and moves you closer to your overall target. Practise each step a few times until you feel confident enough to go on to the next. Remember to praise yourself when you have been successful – you have done well!

Positive self-talk

A useful way of helping yourself through a difficult or worrying situation is by using self-talk. Positive self-talk helps you to feel more relaxed and confident by keeping doubts and worries under control. You do this by saying positive things to yourself when you feel worried or unsure you will be successful.

- **I am** going to go back to that place again
- **I have** managed to get to the door so now **I am** going in

Repeat your positive message and praise yourself as you face your challenges.

Talk about it

You may find it difficult to talk to other people about your trauma. You may want to try to forget it. At other times, you might feel that people aren't interested in what happened or worry that they will become upset if you talk about how you're feeling. This isn't always helpful, and although it might be hard, it is often good to try to talk about what happened. This can help you make sense of it and feel more in control.



Compiled by the Traumatic Stress Clinic in collaboration with the Child and Family Information Group. Adapted with permission from original material by Dr Paul Stallard.

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