



Understanding trauma

a guide for you and
your family

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Welcome

Niche are working with you at this time because we are doing an investigation, and you are involved either as the patient or as a family member/loved one of a patient.

This booklet provides information to help you to recognise if you or a loved one are experiencing trauma and to guide you through what this means.

We have written this booklet in a format which you can write on, take notes and put in reminders. It is our intention that this booklet should be personal to you and so if you would like more copies, please let us know. If you require a version of this booklet for a child, or a version in easy read format, we can facilitate this for you.

We strongly recommend, if you feel you may be experiencing trauma, that you reach out to a

professional such as your GP for further advice and support.

We recognise that involvement in an investigation can be difficult, and you will probably have many different feelings about the process during the course of the review and afterwards, and we recognise and understand this.

Whilst we may not be able to provide you with direct personal support because of the requirements around our independence, we can certainly help to guide you to access other dedicated support.



What is **trauma**?

Trauma is real, and it can really affect how you live your life for a period of time. It can change the way you see things, how you respond to things, and it can affect your physical health. Trauma is not just something you 'get through', understanding it and accepting it is happening can make a big difference.

A definition of trauma is *"distressing events which are extreme or intense, and which can overwhelm a person's ability to cope, resulting in impact to daily life"*.

Trauma has been studied extensively by doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists and scientists. Here are some of the things we know about trauma:

- Trauma is common, and it is normal; more people than not have experienced trauma in their lives.
- Everyone experiences and responds to trauma in different ways but there are some shared signs and characteristics of trauma.

- Everyone experiencing trauma will take a different length of time to recover from trauma.
- Trauma recovery is not a straight-line (linear) process. You might feel better one week and much worse again the next.
- Trauma responses can be held within the body for a long time and can cause physical ill-health.

But positively:

- Trauma will teach you to understand yourself and others on a very deep level.
- You CAN set a goal of recovery from trauma and grief, and you can start to build a new future.
- There are many support systems and resources for trauma, and research is evolving all of the time. This means there is a SIGNIFICANT amount of help available to you.



What are the **causes** of trauma?

There are so many different causes of trauma that they cannot all be listed here. Here are some causes of trauma:

- Losing a loved one through violence or a traumatic event
- Losing a loved one suddenly or watching them deteriorate over time
- Being in or witnessing a serious accident, e.g. a car crash
- Being in fear of your life or the life of a loved one, for example, a harrowing medical emergency
- Experience of racism, homophobia or institutionalised aggression.
- Physical or sexual assault
- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's), such as neglect, abuse, losing a parent, witnessing domestic violence.
- Having been groomed, cheated or manipulated
- Complicated or poor childbirth experiences
- A poorly child
- Natural or man-made disasters, e.g. tsunamis or fires
- Trauma can be inherited through generations, for example families of Holocaust survivors or victims of war.

It's important to remember that there are a huge number of events not covered here that can feel traumatic. If your experience is not covered here, **that does not mean** you shouldn't seek help and support.



How does trauma **show-up**?

There are many different ways that trauma can affect us, and emotions and responses can be easily conflicted and confused. These can be mental, emotional, physical and behavioural. Let's list out some of these below:

Mental reactions to trauma

- reduced concentration and memory loss – your brain might have gone into a sort of 'anaesthetic mode' where it will only let you deal with small amounts of information at a time.
- confusion or disorientation.
- shock – difficulty believing in what has happened, feeling detached and confused
- feeling numb, detached and disassociated from your surroundings, not wanting to connect with others or becoming withdrawn from those around you
- feeling as if you are in a state of 'high alert' and 'on watch' for anything else that might happen
- rage, escalating anger which is explosive or becomes obsessive
- intrusive thoughts about the event or repeatedly playing parts of the event over in the mind
- being very protective of others, including family and friends
- not wanting to leave a particular place for fear of what might happen
- continuing alarm – feeling like the danger is still there or the event is continuing
- swinging between these reactions.



Emotional reactions to trauma

- fear, anxiety and panic disorders such as agoraphobia - You might feel particularly upset when you are near where the event happened or in an environment that reminds you of the event
- avoidance - You might avoid memories, thoughts, feelings, things, people and places associated with the event
- feeling negatively about yourself, others or the world, or blaming yourself or others for what happened
- being unable to feel happiness, satisfaction or love towards others
- feeling depleted – after the crisis, exhaustion may become obvious. Emotional reactions to the event are felt during the post-crisis phase, and can include depression, avoidance, guilt, oversensitivity, and withdrawal
- Conflicted emotions and difficulty labelling emotions/making sense of feelings
- Feelings of relief or gratitude – relief and also guilt at having survived the trauma, gratitude toward those who offered support and feelings of increased strength or resilience

Physical reactions to trauma

- fatigue or exhaustion, needing to sleep and withdraw
- disturbed sleep, insomnia and disturbing dreams or flashbacks. You might have dreams or nightmares about the event. You might also experience the event as if it is happening again (known as a flashback)



- not wanting to eat or eating excessively
- nausea, vomiting and a feeling of unreality
- headache, tension and a feeling of pressure
- sweating, palpitations and an increased heart rate

Behavioural reactions to trauma

- anger and wanting revenge on anyone and everyone - “I want heads to roll” becoming singularly focussed on this...
- seeking out the experiences of others on social media.
- self-diagnosing and getting immersed in recovery-related tasks
- turning to substances such as cigarettes, alcohol and illicit drugs
- staying up late, and a loss of normal routine
- not doing or being interested in things you used to enjoy such as exercise or a hobby
- acting in ways that are reckless or self-destructive
- becoming more vulnerable to manipulation and persuasion
- changes in relationships – you might blame someone close, or you might feel unable to express love towards your family

If it is helpful to you – mark all of the items above that you recognise in relation to how you feel or how you think a loved one is feeling.



Trauma is individual

Your own individual response to trauma can be compounded by a trauma that you might not have resolved from your past. This can sometimes mean that you are being 're-traumatised' and this can greatly influence the way you respond or react to the recent traumatic event.

In this way, you make experience any of the symptoms listed above but this might be made worse by residual trauma caused by (for example):

1. Childhood bullying, abuse and stress.
2. Trauma caused by dealing with authority, for example, adverse experiences dealing with teachers, the police or an employer.
3. Experiences of racism, homophobia, being or feeling excluded, misunderstood or repeatedly discounted or undermined.
4. You grew up in care, or you were adopted or fostered.
5. Experiences of suicide,

domestic violence or rejection.

6. Previous loss of a loved one, a child, miscarriage, abortion.

You may have developed many different coping methods over the years to deal with this unresolved trauma. These might include:

- Suppressing your emotions, and emotional 'flat-lining'
- Being overly nice and non-confrontational
- Being aggressive and overly confrontational
- Not trusting anyone or feeling everyone has bad intentions towards you
- Disliking authority, in fact, disliking people with certain characteristics for no real reason at all
- Using drugs and alcohol as well as putting yourself into risky situations
- Not feeling comfortable when things are running smoothly, and sabotaging or creating issues.



Trauma can make you **vulnerable**...

There are a number of ways that trauma can make you more vulnerable and exposed to risk. These include:

- You might be vulnerable to fraud, 'helpful' off-prescription medical treatments, 'quick-fix solutions'.
- Many people will turn to drugs and alcohol to 'switch-off' during and after traumatic events, but both of these things could easily end up making the situation worse, as they are depressants and may reduce your ability to cope.
- There may be media interest in your story, and trauma may have impaired your boundaries. The media may seek to sensationalise your experience; however, this is your personal information. You cannot control how the media will use your information, and you may become swept away by the process. Give yourself time and take proper advice from someone you trust before involving the media.
- You might think that it will help you by expressing your views on social media platforms – mainly because people can quickly feel 'validated' by other people. However, this can very easily go the other way too via internet 'trolls'. Be very careful what you invite into your life, as this risks compounding the trauma that you already feel.
- There is nothing wrong with wanting to channel your trauma into finding out what happened by doing your own investigation. This might be because your trauma is telling you not to trust or rely upon those doing this work. Investigations are very complex processes which involve many people and many experts and professionals.
- There may be occasions where you have to engage in a legal action, such as if your case goes to Coroner's Court or is the subject of an Article 2 Inquest. Take the best advice that you can from someone that you trust.



The way trauma affected **our family**...

After it happened, we were just so broken.

We had each other and we also had two other children to look after. We had to try and maintain some normality for them, but this took every ounce of energy that we had during the day. We wanted to keep as much normality as possible.

By the end of each day, we were exhausted, we had nothing left and we struggled to reach out to each other; we were so lost in our grief.

We began to cope by focussing on different things. I kept plodding along and trying to get through the day-to-day tasks, cooking, washing clothes and stuff. I couldn't go back to work to the job I enjoyed because I worked in a hospital, and it was just too triggering for me.

My husband went a completely different way. He wanted someone to be held to account for what happened, he wanted vindication, he wanted change. He felt that he wasn't being listened to, and he also no longer trusted

the NHS. He started going online every night, late into the night, it didn't take him long to find others who also didn't trust the NHS. At first this made him feel better but then I could see him going further and further down this rabbit hole of blame and anger.

It felt like I wanted to heal, and my husband could only respond by staying angry and trying to name people on social media.

Our GP helped us to realise we had each been processing the trauma in a completely different way but both wanting the same feeling of relief. We were able to access specialist support.

Today, we are better able to talk to each other and explain when we are feeling like we cannot function, when we are angry, when we feel upset.

We are definitely not there yet, but now it feels much more like we are heading in the same direction with our recovery.



Managing trauma

There are many things that you can do to help yourself or someone you love if experiencing trauma. Everyone has the right to support, even if you perceive yourself as head of the household with responsibility for supporting others. You need help and proper advice from a medical professional, such as your GP, so that they can gain an understanding of the trauma 'journey' that you are on.

Here are some things you could think about:

Give yourself time and be kind to yourself

It can take time to recover from a traumatic event. It might take a while for you to accept what has happened or to learn to live with it. If you have suffered a bereavement, or you have lost someone significant to you, you need to grieve.

Getting through trauma can take time. Try not to expect too much of yourself or others too quickly.

There are several stages to grief or shock, and they include:

- **Denial:** A temporary response where people feel numb or try to go on as if nothing has happened
- **Anger:** People may feel angry at the deceased, at themselves, or at others
- **Bargaining:** People may make deals with themselves or a higher power, and focus on their own regrets or faults
- **Depression:** People may feel intense sadness and longing
- **Acceptance:** People accept the loss and that their life will continue without the deceased

These stages can happen in any order.

Recognise that you have been through a distressing experience and that you will have a reaction to it. Remind yourself daily that you are managing and try not to get frustrated with yourself if you are struggling.



Talk about the trauma / start to process it

After a traumatic event you might want to avoid things that remind you of the event and avoid talking about what happened. However, research has shown that talking about the event and your feelings can help you to be more resilient as this means you are starting to process your feelings in a productive way – although it may not feel like it at the time. Avoiding memories and feelings means you are not processing them.

Ask for support from those you love

Seeking support from friends, family or other people that you trust can help you to cope better after a traumatic event, even just having people around without necessarily having to talk can be useful. As well as offering emotional support, they might be able to help you with practical tasks or just spend time with you doing 'normal' things.

Avoid spending lots of time alone

Being around other people has been shown to make you less likely to experience poor mental health after a traumatic event. While this might not be possible, if you live alone you might want to see if you can stay with family or a close friend after a traumatic event. If this isn't possible, try to spend more time with people close to you, such as going on walks together.

Stick to your routine

Try to keep to the routine you had before the traumatic event as much as you can, even if that feels difficult; this is also sometimes known as 'time-structuring'. After the event you might find that eating and exercise habits change, and that you find it hard to sleep. Try to eat and exercise regularly and get enough sleep.

Get out into the daylight at regular intervals, noticing the things around you.



Consider seeking professional help

Some people can find it helpful to speak to their GP if they are struggling. You might want to wait between a few weeks and a few months before seeking out specialist mental health support because often professionals cannot remedy what is a normal human response to grief, shock and trauma.

However, if the feelings you are experiencing become worse and not better, then do speak to your GP or seek out some specialist trauma support (see resources section).

Notice how you're feeling

For the first few months following a traumatic event, you might want to pay attention to how you are feeling over time. You could even keep a simple log or a diary.

If you are working, ask for support from your employer

You should let your employer know what has happened so that they can support you. You could ask them to make adjustments to how you work, like ensuring you are not

exposed to further trauma or intense stress or adjusting your hours and giving you time off to go to appointments or care for family.

Talking therapies

Talking to a trained professional who is unconnected to the event can be very beneficial indeed. This person should be trained and competent in helping to guide you through your thoughts and feelings and to address feelings such as guilt, shame and regret. Talking therapies can help you learn to process your feelings in a way which supports your recovery.

Take care of you

After a traumatic event, people are more likely to have accidents because they are distracted and can be confused.

Be very careful around the home and when you are driving. Ask others to drive you places or help you with certain tasks. Try and get support with childcare or the care of elderly relatives.

Recognise that you cannot continue to take care of everyone else's needs whilst you are experiencing trauma.



How trauma might evolve

During the trauma

It's important to understand that you cannot process trauma while it's still happening.

This is really important to know.

When you're under immense stress, you go into "survival mode," where your sympathetic nervous system, which prepares your body for stressful or dangerous situations, is forcing you to operate on an evolutionary instinct to either stay and fight, flee to save yourself, or freeze.

You are often *behaving, reacting and responding*, rather than thinking clearly during these times.

Try to recognise where 'active trauma' is ongoing; this might be that you are involved in a legal dispute, there is police involvement or you are waiting for a funeral or inquest, for example.

Healing and recovery process after immediate trauma

Most people only stay in emergency survival mode for a short period of time or until the immediate threat has passed, but sometimes people keep going into

it afterwards when unexpected things happen. Being in emergency mode uses up vital energy supplies and this is why people often feel tired immediately after a traumatic event.

The normal healing and recovery process involves the body coming down out of heightened arousal.

The internal alarms can turn off, the high levels of energy subside, and the body can re-set itself to a normal state of balance.

Longer-term healing and recovery after trauma

There is no timescale for how quickly you can recover from trauma, and it is wise to accept that going through trauma might change you in substantial ways.

Understanding and recognising trauma in yourself and others, however, does give you a good chance of returning to some semblance of who you once were



Whether it has been weeks or months, you can begin to reflect on and process what happened to you—but unless certain factors are in place, you may not be able to fully process, and thus, recover from it.

Young people may not be able to process their trauma at all and may need professional, specialist child and adolescent mental health support. It is true that children can absorb and internalise the trauma of adults and so helping them to understand what has happened in 'bite size' chunks may be helpful.

Being in a safe and secure environment with plenty of validation and support can help promote trauma recovery—but not everyone is able to do that. For example, people in prisons, children in care or in an abusive or unpredictable environment, will really struggle to process that trauma without help.

Recognising and avoiding triggers

Over time you may well be feeling that you are moving along in your trauma journey and starting to accept and process the trauma. You may even have started to recognise some parts of 'your old

self' coming back and you may be starting to give yourself permission to live life again and take positive steps.

When you get to this stage, it is good to know about 'triggers' which may come along. Types of triggers might include:

- Someone overstepping boundaries
- Finding yourself in a place which is associated with the trauma
- If you become stressed or feel overwhelmed
- Not expecting to have to talk about the event
- Someone upsetting you – you may have disproportionate responses for some time.

It is helpful to note down all of things which have helped you on your trauma journey in the past and re-trace those steps and to remember to:

Give yourself time and surround yourself with all of the support that you can.



Giving yourself **permission** to recover

It is so important that you recognise that, even though you may have been through a life-changing event, you still need to find a way of recovering and carrying on. You may have people who love you and want to see you participate in and even enjoy your life. It is perfectly normal to feel a range of emotions following trauma, and this booklet has explained some of these. It is normal to feel guilt or regret if you find yourself smiling or enjoying life - but smiling and enjoying life again, in the best way that you can, can and should be a goal.

This is a positive and hopeful goal to have.

You could set yourself smaller goals and targets, such as:

- “This morning I’m going to go for a walk and read my book in the park”
- “I’m going to cook my favourite food tonight”
- “I’m going to make it to my child’s/niece/nephew end of year play”
- “We will go out to eat and take the pressure off

ourselves a bit”

Larger goals and targets might include:

- “I will go back to work or school”
- “Next year we will aim to go on holiday to our favourite place”
- “I’m going to do some work with a charity which is close to our cause”
- “I’m keeping notes so that one day I can write a book”
- “I’ve always wanted to do x,y,z... I’m going to start planning”

Some of the above might seem very far away for you at the moment, and you should only set yourself goals which are achievable and attempted at the right time.

Try to adopt the expectation that you will get better – Focusing on the idea that you will eventually get better and gain a ‘new normal’ will be good for your recovery.



Resources

[UK Psychological Trauma Society](#) – here you can find a selection of materials which helpful information for the general public and for health professionals about Post Traumatic Stress Reactions.

[Overview of PTSD, NHS](#) – this information from the NHS covers PTSD

[Overview of complex PTSD, NHS](#) – this information from the NHS covers complex PTSD

[PTSD, Mind](#) – the charity Mind has information on PTSD and complex PTSD

[How can friends and family help? Mind](#) – This information offers ideas for how you can help someone you know who has PTSD

[Useful contacts, Mind](#) – This page has links to other charities and organisations that offer support to people with PTSD

Charities supporting people with PTSD

Here are some charities that offer support to people who experience PTSD or traumatic events:

[PTSD UK](#) – A UK charity dedicated to raising awareness of PTSD

[Combat Stress](#) – the UK charity for veterans' mental health.

[Cruse Bereavement Care](#) – a charity offering support for bereaved people in England, Wales and Northern Ireland

Victim Support – there are three victim support charities that offer support to people across the UK who have been victims of crime and traumatic incidents:

[Victim Support - England and Wales](#)

[Mental Health UK](#) – An organisation which offers support, advice and help for anyone struggling with poor mental health or who has a family member who is.

[Sudden](#) – This bereavement charity offers a helpline for families who experience any type of sudden, unexpected death.

[Cruse](#) – General bereavement support.



INQUEST – An organisation providing free and independent advice to bereaved people following a death in state care or detention in England and Wales, and in other cases where wider issues of state and corporate accountability are in question. They also provide a [guide to inquests for families](#). Downloadable and hard copies are available.

FAMS – A charity which offers peer group support from family members who have experienced murder, suicide and mental health issues.

Rethink – This charity aims to improve the lives of anyone with mental health issues through peer support, services and information.

Sane – A charity which campaigns for issues around mental health and offers emotional support and advice to anyone struggling with mental health issues.

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide – A charity that exists to meet the needs and overcome the isolation experienced by people over 18 who have been bereaved by suicide.

Papyrus – Prevention of Young Suicide – This charity supports and advises any family who is concerned about suicide in the family or has lost a family member to suicide. They offer a helpline, support and advocacy for families. They also offer training for professionals around suicide prevention.

National Suicide Prevention Alliance – This charity is an alliance of public, private, voluntary and community organisations in England who work to prevent suicide and support families affected by suicide.

The Compassionate Friends – This long-established charity offers support, advice and counselling for bereaved parents. They have a helpline and organise events both locally and nationally. They also publish a regular magazine.

Apps are also available such as ‘[Calm](#)’ and ‘[Headspace](#)’, many people find these an invaluable help and resource for them.

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