

Coping after a traumatic injury

Scottish Trauma Network, North
of Scotland Trauma Unit

Major Trauma Team Psychology

**This leaflet has been given to you as
you have experienced a serious injury.**

It explains more about the psychological impact a traumatic event can have on us, and aims to help you to understand some of the normal feelings you might be experiencing. It includes strategies and contact details for further information and support.

What is a traumatic event?

A traumatic event is an unexpected and often frightening situation, associated with immediate danger.

Examples of traumatic events that have happened to Major Trauma patients include:

- Road traffic accidents
- Being attacked
- Falling from height
- Industrial/workplace accidents

A traumatic event can result in physical injuries, such as broken or fractured bones, chest injuries or head injuries.

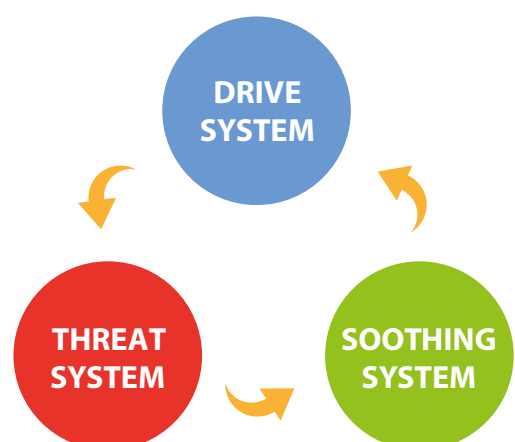
A traumatic event affects everyone differently, and we usually have some kind of an emotional response to threatening or distressing situations. It is normal to experience increased feelings of distress and shock after an unexpected event, but usually, in time, difficult thoughts and feelings begin to settle without the need for professional help.

How does our brain process a traumatic event?

The brain's threat (alarm) system can become over-active causing us to feel heightened fear, and be on the lookout for danger, even when we may be safe.

Our brains can struggle to process traumatic events, with memories feeling vivid and current as the brain struggles to tell the difference between the past and the present.

We can experience 'flashbacks', where it feels like the event is still happening, and notice intense emotions and distress. Shock, denial and difficulty making sense of what happened are all normal, common responses.



Common responses to trauma

Common thoughts:

I can't cope / This is overwhelming
I am not safe / I am in danger
Something bad will happen again

Common feelings:

Relief / Guilt / Blame (self or others) / Low mood / Anxiety / Fear/ Disbelief /
Helplessness / Anger / Frustration /
Sense of numbness – blocking out emotions

Common physical symptoms:

Tearful / Disrupted sleep/ Loss of appetite
Difficulty concentrating / Poor attention/ Pain / Discomfort

Common behaviours:

Hypervigilance: scanning the area for perceived danger / Avoiding places,
people, reminders or conversations about what happened

You might also find you are re-experiencing the traumatic event, with intrusive memories of your accident, flashbacks, and possibly nightmares or vivid dreams.

The impact on daily life

You may notice that your usual daily functioning is understandably impacted as you come to terms with what you have experienced. You may struggle with work or studies, noticing difficulties with your concentration. You might notice that your emotions are more intense and unpredictable, feeling stressed and anxious.

You may experience difficulties in your relationships as a result. Leisure activities can become less enjoyable or be avoided entirely. Basic home tasks may feel overwhelming. You may want to interact less socially, due to feelings of fear or anxiety. Physical injuries from the event can require significant adjustments, adding further challenges.

What can I do now to help my recovery?

All these reactions are normal and understandable, given what you have experienced. But there are strategies you can start to use yourself to help your recovery.

Self-care and compassion

Try not compare yourself to others: recovery takes time, and there will be good days and bad days.

Prioritise sleep, rest, and nutrition to support physical & emotional health.

Set small, realistic and achievable goals and celebrate small successes.

Find creative outlets: work through your emotions through art, writing, or music.

Time

Give yourself time to process and accept what has happened.

Ask for help and talk to others

Spend time with supportive friends & family and talk about your experience, when you feel able to.

Ask for and accept practical and emotional support from others.

Remind yourself

The traumatic event is in the past and is not happening to you now.

Reassure yourself that you are safe by focusing on the differences between the traumatic event and your current surroundings. Take a moment to observe what's different around you—your location, the people nearby, and what you can see, hear, or touch.

Routine

Try to keep to your usual daily routine as much as possible to bring structure and normality back to your life.

Be active and get time outdoors, taking into account any physical limitations in your recovery.

Coping strategies to try

When we are feeling overwhelmed it can be easy to get caught up in our thoughts and feelings and lose sight of the present moment. Being able to ground ourselves can help us to develop present moment awareness and be more in our bodies and less in our heads. Try using these techniques if you are experiencing panic or anxiety; they may not work immediately and require some practice.

5-4-3-2-1: Look around, what are 5 things you can see? 4 things you can hear? What 3 things you can touch or feel? What 2 things can you smell? Take 1 deep breath, and focus on the feeling of stress and anxiety leaving your body.

4-4-6 breathing: Breathe in to the count of 4, hold for a count of 4, breathe out for the count of 6 (repeat x 4).

Diaphragmatic breathing: Take a deep breath in and imagine you are inflating a balloon, expanding your stomach as you breathe in, and as you breathe out imagine that balloon deflating (repeat x 4).

Focused attention: Focus your attention on an object you can see. Describe that object to yourself in detail. Don't just notice the green chair; consider the texture, the shade of green, the shape, the weight. Explore with curiosity.

Mindfulness: we have a constant stream of thoughts and feelings we experience, and can quickly become caught up in these. Mindfulness involves paying attention to what is going on inside and outside ourselves, moment by moment, without judgement, and helps us learn to take a step back from our thoughts and notice their patterns. Reminding yourself to take notice of your thoughts, feelings, body sensations and the world around you in your daily life is the first step to mindfulness.

Useful websites and contacts

- [**assisttraumacare.org.uk**](http://assisttraumacare.org.uk) Information and specialist help for people who have experienced trauma or are supporting someone who has.
- [**brake.org.uk**](http://brake.org.uk) Information and support for people bereaved or seriously injured due to road traffic accidents.
- [**nhsinform.scot/mind-to-mind**](http://nhsinform.scot/mind-to-mind) Information and strategies for improving mental wellbeing.
- [**breathing space.org**](http://breathing.space.org) A confidential phone line for anyone in Scotland struggling with their mental health.
- [**mindful.org**](http://mindful.org) for more information about mindfulness.

What if I find that I am still struggling?

For many people, difficult thoughts and feelings start to reduce in the months following a traumatic event. You might notice however that you continue to have difficulties, such as feeling overwhelmed by thoughts and emotions, difficulty sleeping, avoiding your usual activities, or notice a difference in your relationships. It's okay and normal to seek support after a traumatic event. Major Trauma Psychology can offer further assessment and intervention if required, offering a safe space to understand your emotions, and develop coping strategies to help you deal with the impact these difficulties are having on your daily life.

Contact us

If you would like to speak to us during your inpatient stay, please contact the Major Trauma Coordinators.

Alternatively, you can e-mail the team at [**nhsh.majortrauma@nhs.scot**](mailto:nhsh.majortrauma@nhs.scot), or leave a message on the Major Trauma Psychology phone number

[**www.nhshighland.scot.nhs.uk/trauma**](http://www.nhshighland.scot.nhs.uk/trauma)

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