

Trauma and the Body

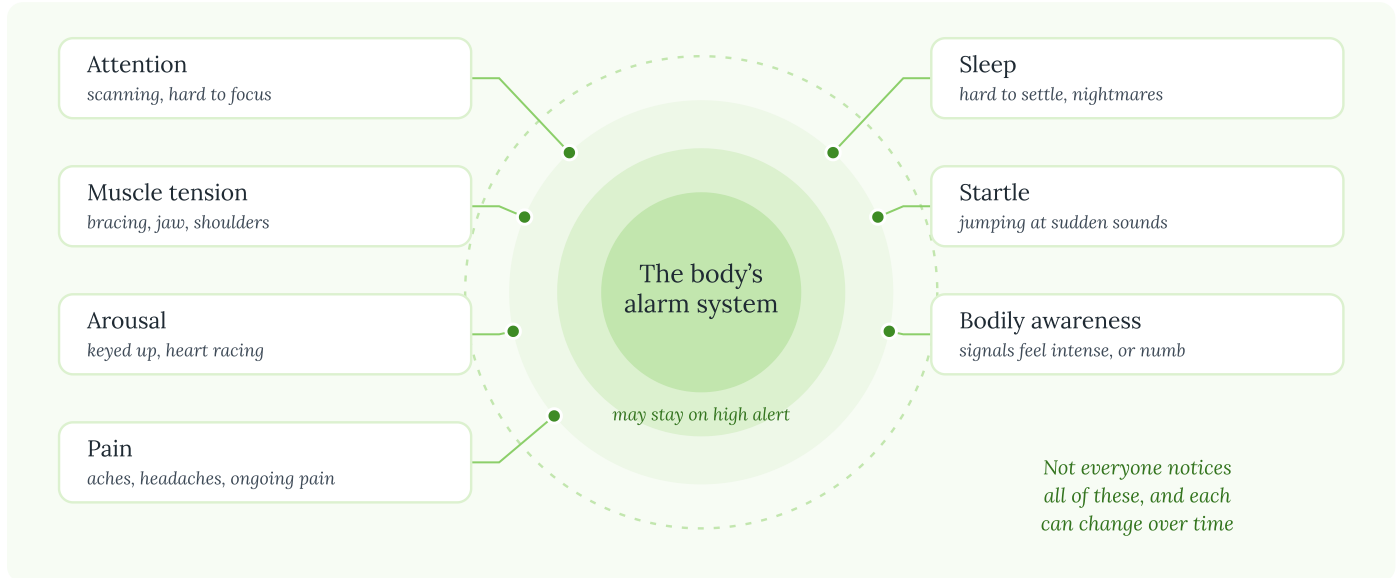
PSYCHOEDUCATION · TRAUMA, AROUSAL AND PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE

How frightening experiences can show up in the body, and why these changes make sense

You may have heard that “the body stores memories”. This is a helpful metaphor rather than a literal scientific finding. What research does show is that trauma can affect how the body’s alarm system responds, which can influence arousal, tension, startle, sleep, pain, attention and how we notice our bodies.

01 Where trauma can show up in the body

a simplified picture



Original diagram, simplified for illustration.

02 Seven common body-based effects

what you might notice, and why

01 Arousal

Feeling keyed up or restless, a racing heart, or finding it hard to settle.

Why: The body’s threat response can stay more easily activated after trauma, as if still preparing for danger.

02 Muscle tension

A tight jaw, raised shoulders, headaches or a sense of bracing.

Why: Bracing is part of the protective response. When the alarm is triggered often, tension can become habitual.

03 Startle

Jumping at sudden noises, movements or being touched unexpectedly.

Why: A stronger startle response has been linked with PTSD in research (Pole, 2007). It reflects alertness, not weakness.

04 Sleep

Difficulty falling or staying asleep, waking early, or nightmares.

Why: It is harder to switch off when the body is on alert. Sleep difficulties are among the most common problems after trauma (Germain, 2013).

05 Pain

Aches, headaches, or longer-term pain, especially after an injury.

Why: Pain and trauma symptoms often occur together and may maintain each other, for example through tension, poor sleep and reduced activity (Sharp & Harvey, 2001).

06 Attention

Scanning for danger, losing track of conversations, or forgetting things.

Why: Attention can be pulled towards possible threats, leaving less for everyday tasks.

07 Bodily awareness

Some people notice body signals very intensely. Others feel numb or disconnected from their body.

Why: Both can happen after overwhelming experiences. Noticing the body may feel unfamiliar or uncomfortable at first.

◆ These changes make sense, and they can ease

They are common responses to overwhelming experiences, not signs of weakness. With time, support and effective treatment, many people find these body-based difficulties reduce.

What the research suggests

EVIDENCE NOTE

Heightened physical reactions to reminders and sudden sounds have been linked with PTSD across many studies, although effects vary between people (Pole, 2007). Sleep problems are common and may affect recovery, and targeted sleep treatment can help (Germain, 2013). Trauma-focused psychological therapies are the recommended first-line treatment for PTSD (NICE, 2018).

Popular ideas, such as memories being “stored” in particular muscles or organs, go beyond current evidence. New, severe or unexplained physical symptoms should always be checked with a GP.

Trauma and the Body

WORKSHEET · NOTICING AND SUPPORTING MY BODY

Getting to know your own patterns, with curiosity rather than judgement

Fill in what feels manageable. You do not need to write about the traumatic experience itself, only how things feel in your body now. If noticing your body feels uncomfortable, you can stop, open your eyes if closed, and look around the room.

03 My body check _____ over the past week

Area	How often	Impact 0–10	What I notice when, where, how it feels
Arousal	☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often	_____ /10	
Muscle tension	☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often	_____ /10	
Startle	☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often	_____ /10	
Sleep	☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often	_____ /10	
Pain	☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often	_____ /10	
Attention	☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often	_____ /10	
Bodily awareness	☐ Rarely ☐ Sometimes ☐ Often	_____ /10	

04 Noticing patterns _____

When is it stronger?

Times, places, reminders, tiredness, stress

What seems to ease it, even a little?

People, places, activities, routines

05 Gentle ways to support my body _____ tick any to try

- | | | |
|--|--|---|
| ☐ Slow breathing with a longer out-breath | ☐ Tensing and releasing muscle groups | ☐ Gentle movement, walking or stretching |
| ☐ A regular sleep and wake time | ☐ Grounding through the senses | ☐ Noticing where I am, right now |
| ☐ A warm shower or bath | ☐ Less caffeine later in the day | ☐ Pacing activity, especially with pain |
| ☐ Talking to my GP about sleep or pain | ☐ Time outdoors or in nature | ☐ Other: |

Body-focused exercises can feel uncomfortable at first for some people. Start small, keep your eyes open if you prefer, and stop if it feels overwhelming.

06 My plan this week _____

One thing I will try: _____ When: _____

Body tension before ☐0 ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5 ☐6 ☐7 ☐8 ☐9 ☐10 after ☐0 ☐1 ☐2 ☐3 ☐4 ☐5 ☐6 ☐7 ☐8 ☐9 ☐10

What I noticed: _____

To bring to my next session: _____

GO AT YOUR OWN PACE

Paying attention to the body after difficult experiences can bring up emotions. You can pause, stop, choose a different section, or return to this later. If you become significantly distressed, consider speaking with your psychologist or another appropriate professional.

SOURCES

Germain, A. (2013). Sleep disturbances as the hallmark of PTSD: Where are we now? *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 170(4), 372–382. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.2012.12040432>

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Pole, N. (2007). The psychophysiology of posttraumatic stress disorder: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 133(5), 725–746. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.133.5.725>

Sharp, T. J., & Harvey, A. G. (2001). Chronic pain and posttraumatic stress disorder: Mutual maintenance? *Clinical Psychology Review*, 21, 857–877.