

Why Trauma Can Continue to Affect Us

PSYCHOEDUCATION · THREAT, ATTENTION, THE BODY AND MEMORY

How protective systems work, and why reactions can continue after danger has passed

Reactions after frightening or overwhelming experiences can feel confusing. Many reflect protective systems that evolved to keep us safe. This is general information to help make sense of common patterns; experiences vary widely, and it is not a diagnosis.

1 · DETECT	2 · FOCUS	3 · ALARM	4 · RESPOND	5 · SETTLE
Possible danger The brain registers signs that something may be unsafe.	Attention narrows Attention is drawn towards the possible threat.	The body prepares Heart rate, breathing and muscles change.	Protective reaction Fight, flight, freeze or shutdown.	Recovery Once safe, the body usually settles over time.

01 When the brain detects threat

fast and largely automatic

Fast and *automatic*

Brain networks involved in survival can detect and respond to possible danger rapidly. These processes can operate partly outside conscious awareness, so the body may begin reacting before we have consciously made sense of what is happening.

Cautious by *design*

These systems tend to err on the side of caution. Reacting to something that might be dangerous is usually safer, in evolutionary terms, than missing a real threat.

02 The alarm system and stress responses

how the body prepares

WHAT MAY HAPPEN IN THE BODY	WHY IT MAY HAPPEN
Heart rate and breathing increase	Delivers oxygen and energy to muscles
Muscles tense	Readies the body to move or protect itself
Digestion and other slower processes ease off	Redirects energy to immediate needs
Stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol, are released	Helps sustain the response while needed

Fight

An urge to push back or protect. Later, this may show up as irritability or anger.

Flight

An urge to get away. Later, this may show up as restlessness or avoidance.

Freeze

Becoming still and watchful while the brain assesses what to do. Shutdown is described overleaf.

03 Attention, and why the body can react first

two related patterns

Attention and *threat*

Research suggests that people experiencing anxiety tend to have their attention drawn more readily to possible threat, even when it's outside awareness. After trauma, this may show up as scanning surroundings or noticing small signs of danger. The effect is reliable but modest, and varies between people.

Body before *thought*

Threat detection can happen within moments, while careful reasoning takes longer. Looking back, people sometimes ask "Why didn't I...?" without realising how quickly the body responded.

04 Reminders, memory and strong physical responses

carefully worded, because memory varies

Why reminders can be so *physical*

Sights, sounds, smells, places or sensations linked with a past event can become associated with the alarm response. Researchers have long described how reminders may be linked with strong physiological arousal, even when the present situation is different.

Trauma and *memory*

Memory is an active process, not a recording. After overwhelming events, some people remember very clearly; others have gaps. Memories can sometimes be experienced as vivid, sensory, or difficult to place in context. Research in this area is ongoing, and experiences differ from person to person.

Reminders I've noticed: ☐ Sounds ☐ Smells ☐ Places ☐ Dates ☐ Sensations ☐ Feelings

Some popular ideas about trauma and the body go beyond current evidence. This resource aims to stay close to peer-reviewed research.

The Body, Safety and Recovery

PSYCHOEDUCATION · AROUSAL, DISSOCIATION AND RECOVERY

Too much, too little, and what can help the body and mind settle

After trauma, the body's protective systems can sometimes stay switched on, or switch down. Understanding these patterns can make them feel less frightening. Many people's reactions ease with time, and effective support is available if they don't.

05 Hyperarousal and shutdown

when the system is up, or down

Hyperarousal

TOO MUCH ACTIVATION

Feeling on edge, jumpy or irritable; racing heart or thoughts; difficulty sleeping or concentrating; being easily startled; scanning for danger.

Shutdown and feeling disconnected

TOO LITTLE ACTIVATION, OR FEELING DISCONNECTED

Feeling numb, flat or far away; things seeming unreal; losing track of time; feeling disconnected from your body or surroundings. Mild forms, like "spacing out", are common; more frequent or intense experiences are worth discussing with a professional.

06 Body sensations

tick any you notice

- ☐ Muscle tension
 ☐ Headaches
 ☐ Stomach upset
 ☐ Racing heart
 ☐ Shallow breathing
 ☐ Fatigue
 ☐ Aches or pain
- ☐ Feeling shaky
 ☐ Changes in appetite
 ☐ Feeling heavy or numb

Physical symptoms can have many causes, so it's worth checking new or persistent symptoms with a GP.

07 Why safety and regulation matter

foundations for recovery

Safety first

Physical and emotional safety in the present comes first. Recovery work is usually paced around what feels safe enough now.

Regulation

Grounding, slower breathing, movement and routine may help some people bring strong reactions within a more manageable range.

Connection

Research has linked lower social support after trauma with a higher risk of ongoing difficulties.

08 What can support recovery

and when to seek help

- Gradually re-engaging with daily life, routines and people you trust
- Noticing reminders with curiosity rather than judgement
- Approaching avoided memories or places only gradually, with support

Seeking support

If reactions continue for more than a month or affect daily life, speak with a GP or psychologist. Clinical guidelines recommend trauma-focused psychological therapies, including trauma-focused CBT and EMDR.

NOTICE What do I notice in my body when something reminds me?

First sensation I notice

Where I feel it

Thoughts that show up

What I tend to do next

How long it tends to last

What helps me settle, even a little

SOURCES

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