

Factsheet 10: Understanding changes in the way you think and feel about yourself, others and the world

After experiencing a frightening or traumatic event, people often report that their beliefs about themselves, other people and the world change. For example, people may view the world as more dangerous, that people are not meant to be trusted or that they are permanently damaged by the experience. Some people's spiritual beliefs may also change after traumatic events.

These new beliefs can make us feel strong emotions such as fear, shame, deep sadness and anger. These beliefs may also cause our body to be on constant alert for danger and prepared for the worst. It is common for people to withdraw due to embarrassment, shame or confusion about these intense emotions, leading to increased feelings of despair.



You may notice in yourself or others:

- Strong and ongoing feelings of hopelessness, helplessness, guilt, anger, shame, or disgust
- Loss of interest in beloved activities and difficulty feeling pleasure or happiness
- Loss of hope or meaning in life
- Difficulty trusting others, questioning people's motives, feeling the world is no longer a safe place
- Self-blame, intense feelings of shame or guilt for events beyond your control
- Feeling guilty about surviving or leaving loved ones and community behind
- Feeling broken or damaged due to your experiences
- A sense of not knowing yourself anymore or what you want from life
- Feeling different from others and struggling to fit in
- Strong feelings of anger and desire for revenge toward those considered responsible or toward organisations and people that do not share similar beliefs
- Strong feelings of grief and sadness over all that has been lost

Though frightening, paying attention to these feelings is a crucial step in understanding their meaning, how you've interpreted past events, and what is profoundly important to you.

Trauma can also change our beliefs in positive ways

Many survivors also report developing positive beliefs, viewing the world as a place of hope or opportunity, or feeling blessed or fortunate. This can lead to positive gains, for example greater personal strength, self-reliance, deeper relationships, wisdom, appreciation for life, resilience to stress, and a deeper sense of faith or life purpose.

These positive changes enable many survivors to create rich and deeply meaningful lives in Australia.

Remember:

- It is common for our thoughts, feelings and beliefs about ourselves, others and the world to change after we experience a traumatic event
- It is normal and understandable to want to avoid thinking about very distressing events
- Our thoughts and emotions are important. They can help us understand our experiences
- Talking about our experiences with a trusted person can help us understand our thoughts, feelings and experiences
- Traumatic experiences can also change our beliefs in positive ways

Our beliefs about trauma impact our wellbeing

Our beliefs about why the trauma happened and how we reacted to these events significantly affect our wellbeing. It is natural to want to make sense of what we went through, but intense and distressing emotions associated with traumatic memories can make it difficult to think or talk about these events. This can lead to the development of unhelpful or inaccurate beliefs about how and why the events occurred and what that means about you, other people and the world. Unhelpful beliefs result in more distress and impact on recovery.

Although difficult, talking about our thoughts and feelings with a counsellor or other support person can help us make sense of these experiences in more helpful ways.

To speak with QPASTT or find out more about our services, please call 07 3391 6677 or visit qpastt.org.au.

QPASTT is the Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma. It is a community organisation which provides a variety of flexible and culturally sensitive support services to people who have been tortured or who have suffered refugee-related trauma. QPASTT has offices across Queensland.