

Factsheet 12: How to cope with strong emotions – loss of hope, meaning and purpose

After loss and trauma, many people experience a loss of hope, meaning and purpose to their life, especially when beliefs about goodness and justice are shattered. Some people report feelings of shame and guilt for actions they did or did not do. These feelings can lead to a persistently low mood, loss of joy and withdrawal from friends and family.

Talking about the events, and how you have come to make sense of them, with a trusted person such as a counsellor or community member can be very helpful in overcoming these feelings. Many people find hope and joy in life again when they are provided the opportunity and safety to express their story and make sense of their experiences with someone who will listen without judgement.

Helpful strategies when you are feeling a loss of hope, meaning and purpose:

Engage in regular exercise:

Set aside regular time for a 30-minute walk or exercise 3-4 times per week. Exercise, especially in nature, can help our mood and reduce stress and anxiety.

Schedule activities:

Our behaviour affects our thoughts and feelings. Do not wait to feel better before you do activities you enjoy or bring meaning. By doing these activities, even when we don't feel motivated, we can slowly improve our mood. Schedule enjoyable and meaningful activities every day.

"I heard last year Sudan was in war and my son was there, my mum, my brother – all of them. I felt hopeless, like I was losing everything. But I got my counselling, and then my caseworker called me when they saw it on the TV and I felt like, 'wow, I've got someone who is supporting me. I'm not alone.'" QPASTT client

Connect with others:



Spending time with other people can also improve our mood and reduce feelings of loneliness. Try and organise a meaningful, fun activity with friends or community members. Consider joining a community club or group that is focused on something you enjoy, e.g. sport, cooking, singing, dancing or art. QPASTT offers a range of social groups, or we can help you find another organisation or club in your community that offers social activities.

Develop a gratitude practice:



Research shows that feelings of gratitude can help people feel more positive emotions, improve health and relationships.

A simple gratitude practice is to end each day by reflecting on three small things you are grateful for. Start with the smallest, such as savouring a good cup of coffee or the smell of a flower.

Next ask yourself to think of something else that you are grateful for today that is even smaller than the first.

And finally, ask yourself to think of a joy even smaller than the last one. This practice doesn't erase the sadness in your life but helps you discover moments of joy, however small.

Practice acceptance:



See Exercise: Accepting your emotions on the next page.

It is sometimes not possible to change how we feel or the situation that has caused us distress. Often, we judge our own emotions as being bad or problematic (e.g. we feel guilty that we are unhappy), which makes us feel even worse. Avoiding our emotions also prolongs our distress.

Accepting our emotions without judgement, reminding ourselves that these feelings are normal and will pass, and focusing our attention on our surroundings can be a helpful way of coping with distress.

Talk to your GP:

Medication can be helpful to improve persistently low mood. Medication will not fix low mood but can help reduce the intensity of your feelings. Your GP can help with finding a suitable medication to support your mood and coping.

EXERCISE: Accepting your emotions

Find a quiet and comfortable place to sit or lie down. Close your eyes if you like. Take a deep breath in... and slowly breathe out.

1

Notice your body



Pay attention to how your body feels. Do you feel tight, heavy, or calm? Just notice without trying to change anything.

2

Find your feeling



Ask yourself, "What am I feeling right now?" It could be sadness, anger, worry, or something else. Whatever it is, it's okay.

3

Name the feeling



Say the feeling to yourself, like, "I feel sad," or "I feel worried." If you're not sure, just say, "I feel something."

4

Let it be



Imagine the feeling is sitting next to you. Say to yourself, "It's okay to feel this. I don't need to fight it."

5

Watch the feeling



Notice where the feeling is in your body. Does it feel big or small? Does it stay the same or change? Just watch it, like watching a cloud.

6

Be kind to yourself



Say something kind to yourself, like, "It's okay to feel this way," or "I'm here for me."

7

Let it pass



Picture the feeling as a wave. It comes and goes. Say to yourself, "This will pass."

8

Come back



Take one last deep breath in... and slowly breathe out. Open your eyes when you are ready.



Thoughts of harming yourself or others

For some people, the ongoing and distressing effects of trauma can feel unbearable and can result in thoughts about hurting themselves or others.

These thoughts are not a sign that all is hopeless even though it may feel this way. Rather, these thoughts indicate being overwhelmed by painful feelings that are too much to deal with ALONE. Remember that support is available and that these feelings, although intense, will pass.

Seek out the help of trusted others if you find yourself thinking about harming yourself or someone else.

Speak to a counsellor, your GP or a trusted friend or community member. There are many services available to help you cope with difficult and intense emotions and thoughts of hurting yourself or others.

Where to go for help for immediate support:

If you are having thoughts of hurting yourself or someone else (or someone you know is having these thoughts), please contact the following services for immediate assistance:

Lifeline (24 hours): 13 11 14

Kids Help Line (24 hours): 1800 55 1800

Queensland Mental Health Access Line: 1300 642 255

Emergency Services: 000

These services are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Interpreters are available if needed. You can also call Translating and Interpreter Service (TIS) on 131 450.

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.