

Factsheet 3: The impact of trauma in adults

The natural reaction of the human body to trauma

When something very dangerous happens, our bodies and minds naturally focus on keeping us safe. At the time of the event, it is normal and helpful for our bodies and minds to focus all our energy and attention on trying to keep us safe. The body instinctually prepares itself to either confront the danger (fight), to flee from the danger (flight), or to shut down to protect itself from the danger (freeze). This is known as the **Fight/Flight/Freeze** response.

Sometimes, it is only after the danger has passed that the impact and meaning of the trauma may start to be felt.

Some people may have felt strong and full of determination during traumatic events but find that sometime after the trauma has passed the impacts begin to emerge. Other people may have felt the impacts of trauma immediately, including during the event. People may continue to feel like they are under threat even though the danger has passed. They may continue to feel this way for days, months and even years later.

The ongoing effect of trauma is sometimes called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Common reactions to trauma and stress:



Below are some common reactions adults report after traumatic events and long periods of uncertainty and lack of safety.

01 Re-experiencing frightening memories of what happened:

- Distressing and sudden memories of past events
- Nightmares or distressing dreams
- Intense feelings of fear or terror
- Intense fear at anything that reminds you of the event
- Bodily sensations like racing heart, nausea, dry mouth, difficulty speaking, sweating, trembling, urge to run or freeze, racing mind

02 Wanting to stay away from reminders of the past:

- Avoiding talking or thinking about past events
- Urge to stay away from people, places or activities that remind you of what has happened
- Memory loss
- Feeling numb (no feelings) or not in your body
- Wanting to be alone
- Keeping busy to avoid memories
- Feeling like time is slow or as if in a dream
- Doing things but having no memory of doing them

03 Feeling tense, unable to relax and ready for danger:

- Easily startled and restless
- Feeling on guard and looking out for danger
- Difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- Irritability and anger outbursts
- Inability to relax or sit still
- Difficulty concentrating or learning
- Dizziness, headaches or unexplained body pain

04 Changes in the way you think and feel about yourself, others, and the world:

- Strong emotions like feeling hopeless, helpless, guilty, angry or ashamed
- Loss of interest in the things you loved and difficulty feeling pleasure or joy
- Loss of hope or meaning in life
- Difficulty trusting others and no longer wanting to socialise
- Loss of capacity to feel love or want intimacy
- Loss of self-esteem and knowing who you are or what you want from life
- Thoughts of harming self or harming others

It is important to remember that:

- These reactions are normal reactions to difficult situations.
- How people are affected by trauma will be unique to them.
- Children may struggle to express their distress through words and may show it through behaviour and strong emotions.
- With time and support, most people recover a sense of safety and meaning in their life.

Post-traumatic growth

Many survivors of trauma report unexpected positive gains despite their difficult experiences.

Many people describe feeling strong and self-reliant. They report having deeper relationships, greater wisdom and increased appreciation for life. They say they have more resilience to stress and have experienced a strengthening of their faith or life purpose.

Despite the suffering endured, these positive responses enable many survivors to create rich and deeply meaningful lives in Australia and make significant contributions to their communities.

“I now feel confident. I am mentally okay, not depressed. I continue to have some problems, but I deal with them better.”

QPASTT client



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.