

Factsheet 9: Understanding avoidance

Surviving trauma can cause our minds and bodies to be on high alert, making us instinctively want to avoid things that may be dangerous. It is common for our emotions to shut down (feeling numb or feeling nothing) as a protective measure. It is also common to experience memory gaps to block out overwhelming distress.

These are all part of our body and mind's way of protecting us, which is crucial in the short term or when we are still in an unsafe situation. However, as time passes and the threat is no longer present, these responses can make it hard for us to feel safe in normal, everyday circumstances. This can make it difficult for us to focus on healing.

For many people, the need to avoid reminders of traumatic or frightening events can gradually lessen as the distress that comes with flashbacks and intrusive memories starts to ease. However, for some people the distress of memories make avoidance seem like the only coping mechanism.

Avoidance is not necessarily a conscious decision you make. Avoidance can include making yourself extra busy, so you do not have time to think about your past experiences. Or you may find yourself unable to get anything done or find it difficult to get out of bed and face the day. You may seek distractions like looking at your phone or watching television for long periods. Some people turn to alcohol, drugs or gambling to avoid distressing memories. This can lead to additional problems such as conflict with family members, loss of money and contact with police.

While these responses are understandable, continual avoidance can increase distress over time, stop us from doing what we want to do, and reduce our quality of life.

Signs of avoidance

- Avoiding talking or thinking about past events
- Urges to stay away from people, places or activities that trigger difficult memories
- Avoiding news or information from your home country
- Memory loss or gaps in your memory such as blocks of time or specific details
- Having no feelings (feeling numb)
- Desire to be alone
- Keeping busy or seeking distractions to avoid memories
- Feeling like time is moving slowly or as if you were in a dream or not in your body
- Use of alcohol, drugs or gambling to forget about memories





There is hope

Once you are in a safe environment, the distress that comes with difficult memories tends to decline naturally over time, reducing the need to avoid reminders of the past. With the support of loved ones, community and support services like QPASTT, survivors can rebuild a sense of safety and belonging in Australia.

Strategies to reclaim your life with less avoidance

- Remind yourself that it is normal and understandable to want to avoid distressing memories
- Recognise that some avoidance is healthy and appropriate but pay attention to where avoidance might be negatively impacting your relationships or quality of life
- Practice the strategies outlined throughout *Practical Tips for Trauma Recovery* to manage frightening memories or fears
- If you are safe now, remind yourself of this regularly. If you are not in a safe environment, consider reaching out to QPASTT or another service that you trust
- Slowly and gently challenge yourself to do something outside of your comfort zone or that is new to you. It is important that you decide what that is, when and where you do it and if you are ready. You may want to do this with the support of a counsellor who can help you do this in a way that is safe and comfortable for you
- If you are drinking alcohol, using drugs or gambling – speak with your GP, trusted friend or QPASTT. There is help available and your GP and QPASTT can help connect you with these services
- Share your story. This could be writing in a journal or talking with a trusted friend or counsellor



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.