



QPASTT

# PRACTICAL TIPS FOR TRAUMA RECOVERY

# About Practical Tips for Trauma Recovery

*Practical Tips for Trauma Recovery* is a collection of factsheets providing simple explanations about how refugee-related trauma (experienced through war, conflict and forced migration) can affect individuals, families and communities.

It also offers practical strategies that people may find helpful to cope with the stress of settling in a new country and to heal from past experiences.

*Practical Tips for Trauma Recovery* incorporates information developed by the Beacon House Therapeutic Services and Trauma Team (2024). For more information, see [beaconhouse.org.uk](https://beaconhouse.org.uk).

## Who is this information for?

This information is for everyone who has fled war or conflict in their home country to find safety in Australia.

You might have arrived as a refugee, or you might still be on a journey to find safety. You may have lived in Australia for many years, or you may have only just arrived. This information is here to help you cope and thrive in Australia.

## How to use this information

Every person who has been forced from their home and community will feel different emotions. There is no right or wrong way to feel.

You do not need to read all the factsheets contained in *Practical Tips for Trauma Recovery*. We suggest you choose a topic that is relevant to you or your family and discuss the information with your counsellor or a support person.

If at any time you feel distressed by reading this content, please stop and speak with one of our QPASTT staff or a support person.

## About QPASTT

QPASTT is the Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma. It is a community organisation that 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.

To speak with QPASTT please call 07 3391 6677 or visit [qpastt.org.au](https://qpastt.org.au)



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# Factsheet 1: Migration and settlement in a new country

## Settling into your new community might take some time

Arriving in Australia can bring up many different emotions. At first, you might feel relieved, safe, or excited. But after some time, you might experience other emotions like feeling lost, overwhelmed, or tired. It can be a big shock to learn a new language, understand a new culture, and deal with new systems. It can be tiring having to learn so much. You may feel uneasy or uncomfortable because everything is so different.

You may also feel sad about leaving everything and everyone you knew behind. Your financial situation might have changed a lot, and you might feel guilty for leaving while other people stayed. You might worry about the safety of those left behind. You might also feel helpless if your loved ones are in a difficult situation.

Some people find it hard to make decisions and accept help, especially if they are used to being very independent. Some people feel they must be strong and not show their feelings. If you have difficulties with a visa, you might not feel safe because of the uncertainty about your future.

***" You have a lot of stress because it's not your country. When we first came, everything was different."*** Bana, refugee survivor

***" When we were on our way here, we had a general idea that there was such a continent and such a country, and that it would be somehow different there. When we came here, it came as a shock to us."***

Vasyl, refugee survivor

***" I was here with two children, and I felt so sad and alone. When I see the news about my country - my brother is still there - I feel so sad and homeless."***

Caroleen, refugee survivor





# Adjusting to a new culture

When people settle in a new country, they may experience various stages of adjustment:

## Arrival stage:

An initial feeling of hope and excitement. Everything is new and people have high expectations about their new home.

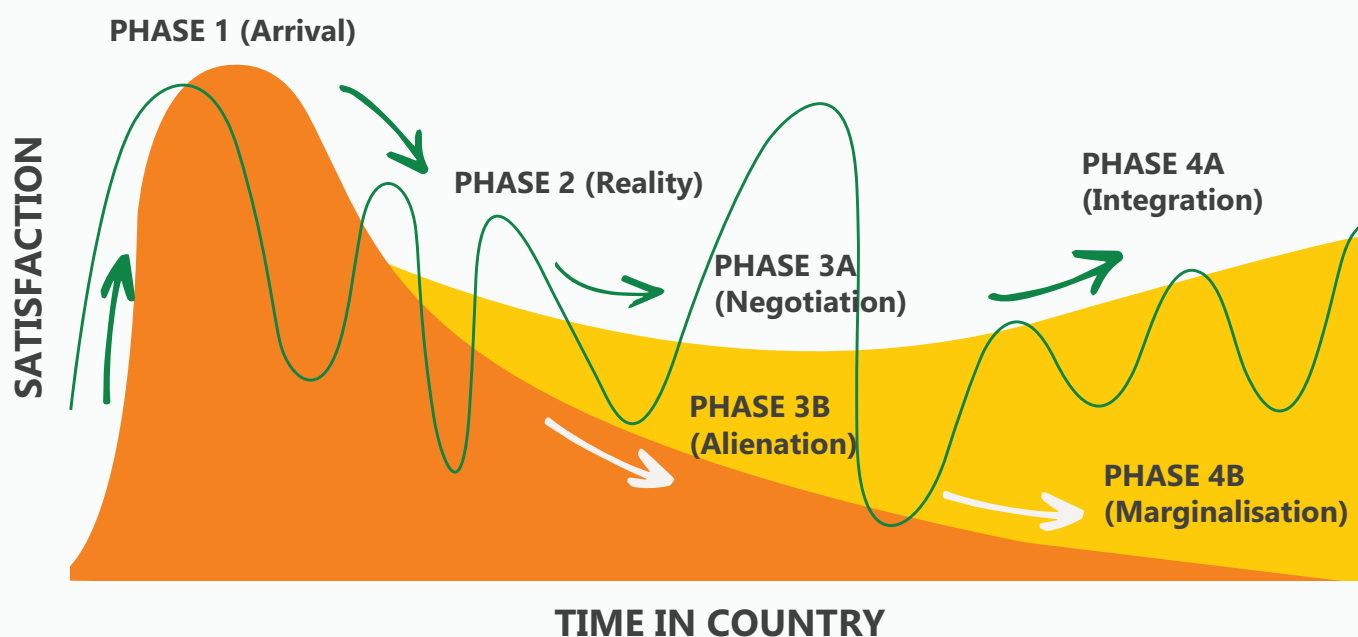
## Reality stage:

A period of feeling homesick, lonely and unhappy. People may experience frustration, confusion, overwhelm and even anger as cultural differences become more apparent.

## Integration stage:

The process of becoming more integrated into the new culture. People may start to feel more comfortable and confident and at home in their new environment.

## PHASES OF REFUGEE ADJUSTMENT



*Adapted from the Centre for Multicultural Youth, 2006*

The graph above shows that there can be many ups and downs as people move through these stages. It also shows that some people may experience ongoing challenges and feelings of not belonging in a community if they do not receive support.

Everyone's experience of adjustment is unique. People will move through stages at different rates depending on their circumstances. All people will not necessarily experience all stages.

It is important to know that all feelings and adjustment experiences are normal. In Australia, it is safe to ask for the support you need. With time, and with the support of loved ones, communities and services, thriving is possible.

**"When I talk about my past trauma it helps me a lot."**

QPASTT counselling client

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# Factsheet 2: What is trauma?

Trauma is a word used to describe life-threatening or extremely dangerous and frightening situations and experiences that can affect a person's ability to cope or function normally. Traumatic events challenge our understanding of the world and our sense of safety within it.



SCAN TO VIEW  
**Counsellor  
explaining  
trauma**

**The term trauma covers events common to the refugee experience, including:**



Experiencing or witnessing extreme acts of violence and cruelty

Exposure to war and conflict

Sexual violence

Separation from family and community

Perilous flight or escape



Threats of harm

Violent destruction of culturally important places



Persecution and human rights violations

Lengthy periods of uncertainty and lack of safety

Extreme poverty and deprivation including lack of access to health care and education

Trauma can also refer to other frightening life events that many people may have gone through including natural disasters, fire, vehicle accidents and serious injury.

*These experiences might cause wounds that we can see on the outside, but they can also cause wounds that we cannot see on the inside which also need to be cared for and healed.*



# Who does trauma affect?

Traumatic experiences can affect anyone, regardless of your gender, your age, your income, your job or education, whether you were born in Australia or arrived as a migrant or refugee.

Almost everyone who experiences trauma will be affected in some way. People often report feeling unsafe and experiencing strong emotions like fear,

sadness, anger, shame and guilt. Some people may feel numb (a sense of having no feelings). Some people may hide or ignore their distress from others to appear strong.

The impact of these events can appear soon after or even years later, impacting health, wellbeing, families, relationships and communities.

## Understanding your experience of trauma

*It is important to remember that:*

- ▶ Reactions to traumatic events are normal human responses to overwhelming stress and fear.
- ▶ Trauma may affect us at different times and in different ways.
- ▶ Healing from trauma whilst settling into a new country is challenging. Your experiences in Australia may also affect recovery. Learning about and accessing support services as early as possible can make a positive impact on your settlement and recovery journey.
- ▶ With time and support, most people heal and find safety, hope and meaning to their lives. Thriving in Australia is possible.



*“Counselling helped me to unpack my refugee experience in a way I never thought I could. It was a tough journey, but I needed to do it. My counsellor has helped me a lot.”*

QPASTT client

## How does QPASTT support trauma recovery?

QPASTT provides free and confidential support to people affected by issues related to their experiences of refugee-related trauma or of being tortured.

QPASTT has a range of different services and programs for adults, families, children and young people and communities.

**People can call QPASTT for advice about accessing our services, or they can make a referral through our website at [qpastt.org.au](http://qpastt.org.au).**

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# Factsheet 3: The impact of trauma in adults

## The natural reaction of the human body to trauma

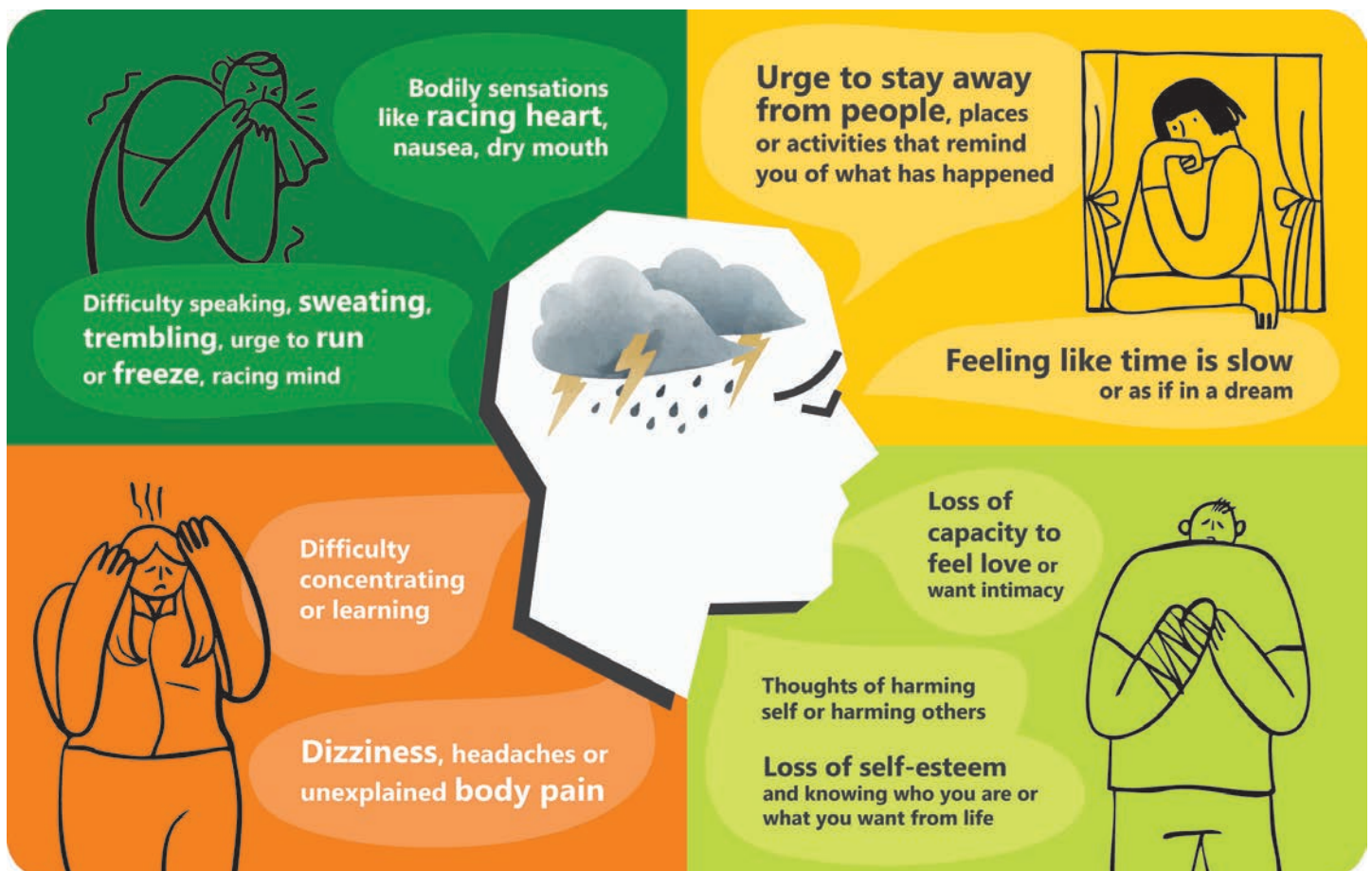
When something very dangerous happens, our bodies and minds naturally focus on keeping us safe. At the time of the event, it is normal and helpful for our bodies and minds to focus all our energy and attention on trying to keep us safe. The body instinctually prepares itself to either confront the danger (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

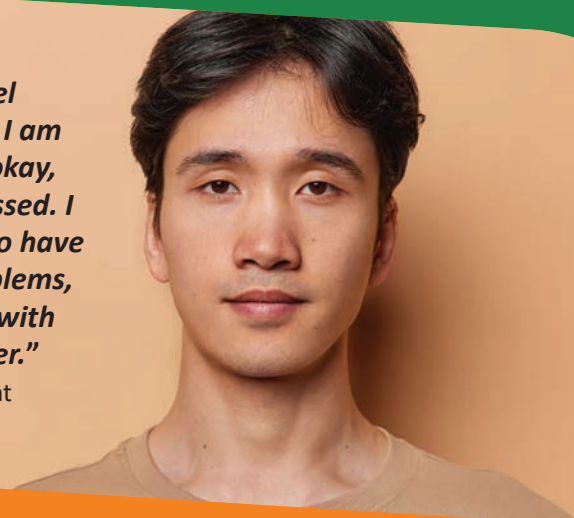
Many survivors of trauma report unexpected positive gains despite their difficult experiences.

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



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# Factsheet 4: The impact of trauma for children and young people

Children and young people can feel the impact of dangerous and frightening events, both when they experience them directly and when they hear about these events from their parents or loved ones.

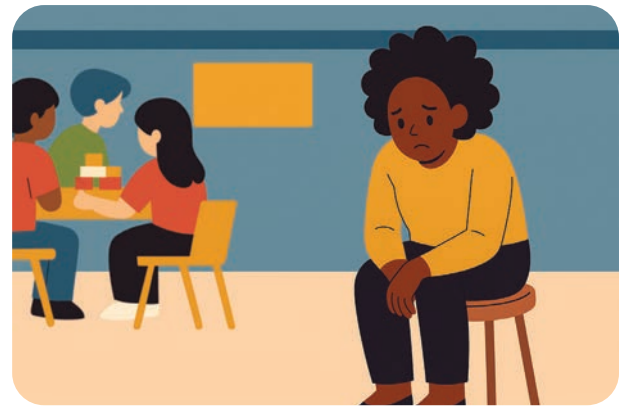
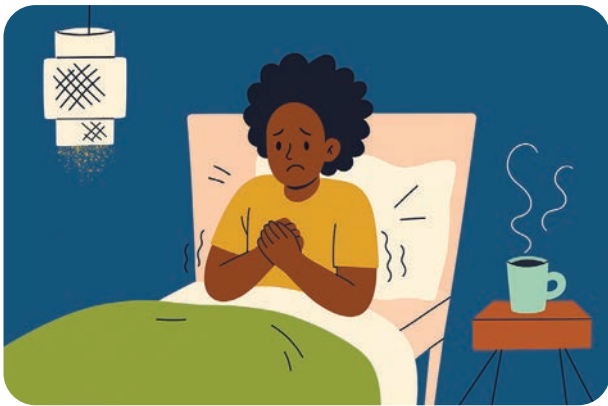
**Because they are young, understanding these events and expressing their thoughts and feelings may be difficult.**

Children and young people's responses to frightening events can be misunderstood as being 'naughty' or 'difficult'. It can be difficult for parents and carers to understand this behaviour, especially if they are dealing with their own distress.

Just like adults, the effects of trauma for children and young people can show up right away or take months or even years to appear. In addition to the impact of trauma, children and young people may be dealing with new challenges in Australia, like making friends, learning a new language, and starting a new school. They may also be experiencing bullying, discrimination or racism.



## Common reactions to trauma and stress for children and young people:



### 01 Re-experiencing frightening memories of what happened:

- Distressing memories during the day affecting learning
- Nightmares or fear about bedtime, wanting to sleep in parents' bed
- Emotional and physical distress around reminders of the events (like bed-wetting, trembling, freezing or appearing distracted)
- Talking about the event with little emotion
- Replaying the events during play or drawing

### 02 Wanting to stay away from reminders of the past:

- Refusal to join school activities
- Difficulty remembering important details about the past
- Avoiding talking about or being around people or situations related to the past
- Not wanting to socialise or play with other children



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

- Concern about something bad happening to family or friends
- Clinginess or distress at separation from caregivers or teachers
- Increased irritability, anger or tantrums
- Difficulty concentrating at school and learning
- Overly alert and restless, unable to sit still or relax
- Easily startled by loud noises
- Trouble sleeping alone
- Frequent headaches or stomach aches, and changes in appetite (not hungry or always hungry, fussy eating)



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

- Loss of interest in things they used to enjoy
- Lack of emotional reactions, seeming numb (no feelings)
- Sad and withdrawn appearance, tearfulness
- Loss of confidence and limited exploratory behaviour, increased clinginess
- Distrust of others, rejecting help or being very independent
- Aggressive behaviour toward self or others (hitting, biting, self-harm)
- Blaming themselves for events or things they did/didn't do



*It is important to note that children may be impacted by what their parents went through, even if they were not there or they were born later. This is called **intergenerational trauma**. Stress and trauma can affect the way parents connect, express feelings, cope with emotions, and talk to their children. Taking care of the wellbeing of parents and carers is essential in supporting the wellbeing of children.*

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# Factsheet 5: How to look after yourself and others affected by trauma



Coping with the impact of our past experiences whilst dealing with the challenges of settling into a new country can sometimes feel overwhelming. Simple strategies can help us regain a sense of control and manage stress.

The following is a list of suggestions provided by other survivors who found these strategies helpful in coping with the stress of settling to Australia and healing from their past experiences.

**If you are struggling, maybe there is just one thing from the list you can do for yourself or someone else this week.**



## Acknowledge and be kind:

- Understand that adjusting to life in Australia takes time
- Be kind to yourself and others. Focus on small positive steps that have been achieved
- Acknowledge your feelings and remind yourself that it is normal to feel overwhelmed sometimes



## Remind yourself that you are safe:

- Reassure yourself and others that you are safe now
- If you are not in a safe environment, consider reaching out to QPASTT or another service that you trust



## Eat healthy meals:

- Eat three healthy meals daily including fruits and vegetables, fish, whole grains, legumes, beans, olive oil, yoghurt and some lean meat or other protein and dairy
- Avoid excess sugar and processed foods (such as chips, biscuits and fried foods)



## Manage your exposure to news and social media

- It is natural to want to keep up with news reports and social media, but they can cause distressing thoughts and emotions and disrupt sleep. Try watching and reading information earlier in the day and plan for how you will ground and calm yourself if you see something distressing (See *Factsheet 8: Understanding and coping with fear, tension, hypervigilance and panic* for some grounding and relaxation exercises)



### **Drink water and limit caffeine:**

- Drink plenty of water (at least 6-8 glasses per day)
- Limit caffeinated drinks (cola, coffee, energy drinks)



### **Spend time outdoors and move your body:**

- Spend at least 10 minutes outdoors every day
- Engage in physical activities you enjoy, like walking, dancing or swimming



### **Establish a sleep routine:**

- Follow a sleep routine by going to bed and waking up at the same time each day
- Spend some quiet time before bed winding down away from phones, televisions and other devices



### **Connect with culture and community:**

- Stay connected to your culture through engaging in cultural activities. This may be through cooking traditional food that brings comfort, reading books and listening to music in your language and linking with people in your community



### **Enjoy family activities:**

- Engage in enjoyable family activities like picnics, exploring, or cooking together



### **Engage with your faith and/or spiritual beliefs:**

- Connect with your faith-based community and spiritual beliefs in a way that feels healing to you



### **Maintain routine:**

- Keep you and your family to a routine so that life feels safe and predictable. Attend school, work and study. Eat breakfast and dinner. Sleep at a similar time each night



### **Ask for help:**

- Asking and accepting help as early as possible is important for healing. In Australia it is safe to ask for the help you need. There are many services like QPASTT in Australia to help you cope and adjust

***"I have been through two wars and those things are in my mind all the time. I dream about it. I can't control it. It is good when I can talk and take it out of my mind."***

QPASTT client

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# Factsheet 6: How to support children and young people affected by trauma

It is normal for children and young people to experience strong emotions and exhibit challenging behaviours after experiencing or hearing about frightening events. Often, these reactions are misunderstood as the child or young person being 'difficult,' or 'naughty' and parents and carers may react with anger or frustration.

**It is important to remember** that children and young people are hard wired to search for safety in the adults and people around them. Our calm and attentive responses towards children and young people in distress can have a powerful effect on their sense of safety and recovery.

## Tips for parents and carers supporting children and young people

- Understand that the child/young person's behaviour may be a sign of fear and the impact of trauma
- Acknowledge the child/young person's emotions. Show them you understand that their feelings are normal given what they have been through
- Listen to the child/young person's thoughts, worries and fears and encourage them to express their feelings
- Reassure the child/young person that they are safe and cared for
- Limit the child/young person's exposure to news or social media
- Do enjoyable activities together as a family (go on a picnic, explore a new location, cook together)
- Engage in activities with the child/young person that keep them connected to your culture
- Provide hugs and physical reassurance if this is wanted by the child/young person
- Provide opportunities for the child/young person to express themselves using art, play or movement







### ***Remember:***

Your wellbeing as a parent plays a big role in helping your child/young person recover from difficult experiences. Taking care of yourself is the first step in supporting their recovery.

If the child/young person's reactions are dangerous, ongoing or getting worse and you find it hard to cope, consider reaching out for more help. You can talk to specialist children and youth workers at QPASTT or speak with your GP.

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# Factsheet 7: Understanding and coping with frightening memories (flashbacks)

After traumatic events, people often have sudden and frightening memories of the events, known as flashbacks. These distressing memories are often accompanied by intense feelings of terror, fear, or shame.

A flashback may make you feel like the trauma is happening again. They are often triggered by something in the present that reminds you of past events.

## During a flashback you might experience:



### Visual flashbacks:

You might see a clear or blurry picture of something frightening in your mind.



### Body flashbacks:

It might feel in your body like the frightening past event is happening all over again, right now.



### Sensory flashbacks:

You might unexpectedly smell, taste, or hear something familiar from the past that is not actually happening now.



### Nightmares:

You might experience nightmares about the traumatic events or other things that give you the same distressing feelings.



### Overwhelming fear:

You might feel an overwhelming sense of fear, terror or anxiety, with physical sensations like a racing heart, feelings of tension, or a feeling of being frozen to the spot.



## Understanding flashbacks

During traumatic events, our body and mind focus on survival, delaying our ability to make sense of the events.

**Flashbacks can happen straight after the event or years later.**

Flashbacks may be the body's way of bringing the memories to our mind so that we can make sense of what has happened and heal. Although very distressing, flashbacks can be a sign that our mind and body are ready to start healing.

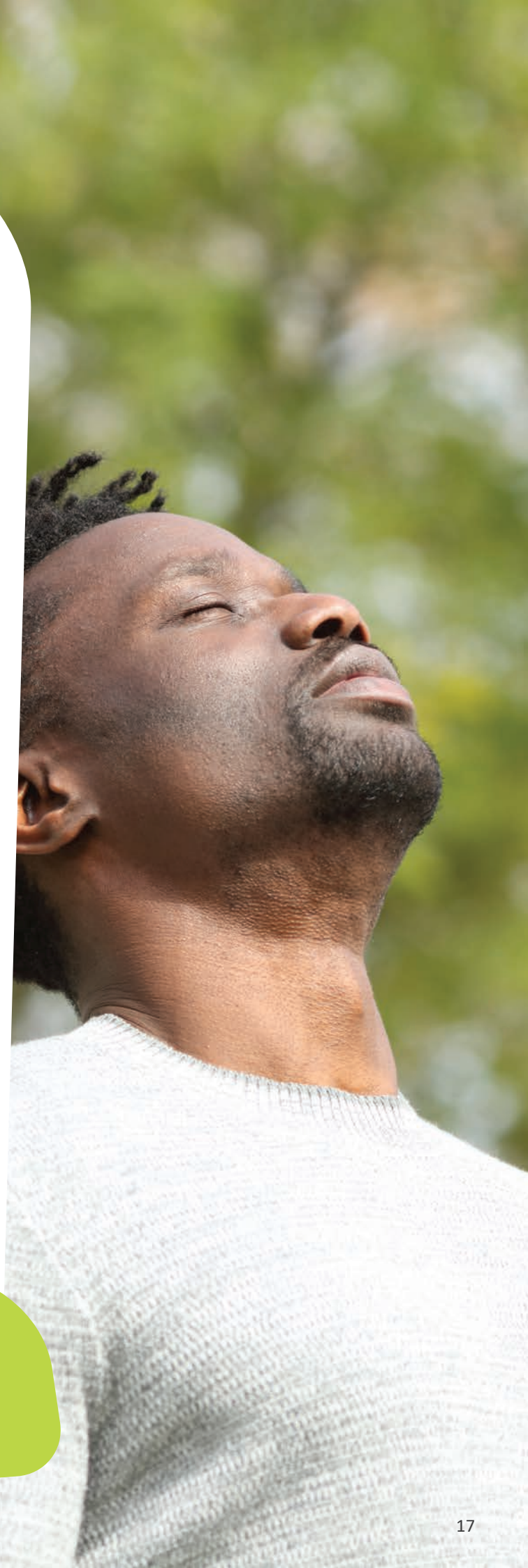
It's normal to try and avoid distressing memories and situations that trigger fear. People often report a cycle of remembering (flashbacks) and avoiding the traumatic memories and feelings. People can feel on edge and constantly scanning for danger. They might avoid memories, people, places and situations that trigger these painful feelings. While this is understandable, continual avoidance can add to distress over time and reduce our quality of life.

## Talking helps

For many people, flashbacks and frightening memories slowly reduce naturally over time. For others, it can feel like they will never leave. While it is understandable to avoid talking about traumatic memories, sharing your experiences with someone you trust can aid healing.

QPASTT offers free and confidential support to help you manage and overcome the effect of these distressing memories.

***“Counselling allows you to express yourself freely in a safe environment without feeling selfish.”*** QPASTT client



# Coping with flashbacks and frightening memories

The following exercises can help you manage flashbacks and frightening memories. When practiced regularly, they can help lower the distress related to these memories and slowly restore a sense of safety. Sometimes flashbacks can be so distressing or frequent and you may find these techniques difficult to do on your own. A QPASTT worker can help you use these strategies in a way that is safe for you.



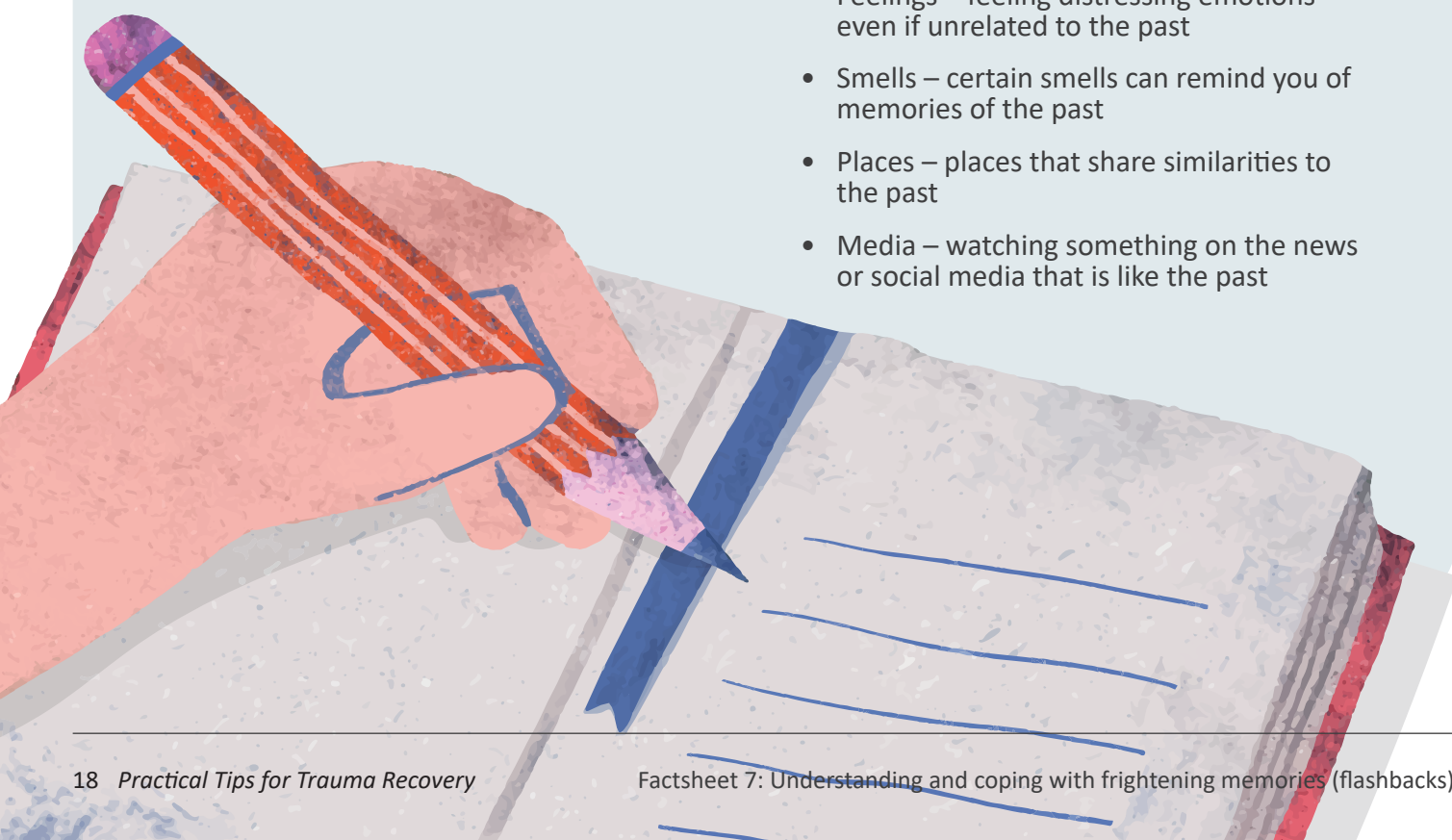
## EXERCISE: Keep a diary of triggers

Keeping a diary of the people, places and events that trigger trauma memories can help you prepare for those situations in the future. When we know what triggers us, we can feel more in charge of how we respond so it is less distressing.

Initially, flashbacks can feel like they come from nowhere. However, flashbacks are triggered by something in the present that reminds you in some way of past events.

Things that can trigger trauma memories can include:

- Sounds – hearing certain sounds that remind you of the past
- People – being around people that are linked to or have similarities related to the past
- Thoughts – certain memories or thoughts can bring back other old memories
- Situations – being in a situation that makes you feel unsafe
- Feelings – feeling distressing emotions even if unrelated to the past
- Smells – certain smells can remind you of memories of the past
- Places – places that share similarities to the past
- Media – watching something on the news or social media that is like the past



## EXERCISE: Dual awareness

Practicing dual awareness (awareness of two or more things at the same time) means we are paying attention to what is happening inside us (our body and mind) as well as to what is happening around us (in our environment). It can help you stay present and regulate your emotions.

It is most powerful when spoken out aloud. You may need to repeat this exercise several times until your distress eases.

Try to pay attention to your breathing and slow/relax your breathing and body. You can also combine this with the Relaxed Breathing Method in *Factsheet 8: Understanding fear, tension, panic and hypervigilance*.

**Practice the exercise below when you are experiencing a distressing memory to help remind your brain and body that you are safe now.**

RIGHT NOW, I AM FEELING...(insert name of the emotion/s)  
AND I AM SENSING IN MY BODY...  
(describe at least three sensations you can feel in your body, e.g. tight shoulders, racing heart)  
BECAUSE I AM REMEMBERING...(name the traumatic memory – but don't go into details of the event)  
AT THE SAME TIME, I AM LOOKING AROUND WHERE I AM NOW IN... (say the year, e.g. 2025)  
HERE IN...(name the place where you are, e.g. my bedroom)  
AND I CAN SEE... (describe at least three things that you see right now, in this place)  
AND SO, I KNOW IT IS NOT HAPPENING NOW/ANYMORE.

## EXERCISE: Sharing your story

There are many ways you may choose to share your story. You may choose to write your thoughts and feelings in a journal. You may write a story, a song, poetry or tell a trusted person.

You may want to consider talking with a counsellor, particularly if sharing your story is very distressing for you.

A counsellor is someone you can talk with confidentially about how you feel and what you are experiencing. They can support you to share your story in a way that is safe for you at a pace that you are comfortable with.

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# Factsheet 8: Understanding and coping with fear, tension, hypervigilance and panic

One of the most common reactions after a traumatic event is an ongoing sense of fear, tension and being on high alert for danger (hypervigilance). These feelings can last long after the traumatic event has passed.

During a life-threatening event, our bodies automatically prepare for danger, releasing hormones to prepare the body to fight the threat, to run away or to freeze. This automatic response prepares the body to protect us from harm and is not within our immediate control.

## How our body responds to threat (Fight/Flight/Freeze)

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.

Even after the initial threat has passed, our mind and body may remain in a state of high alert to ensure safety and keep us away from danger.

When you have experienced prolonged trauma or long periods of feeling unsafe, the body remains prepared for danger and may lose its ability to recognise safety. These responses may continue long after the threat has passed.

## Understanding panic

Panic is a word used to describe a sudden surge of intense fear, occurring without warning. It feels overwhelming, creating a strong desire to flee or a fear of losing control of your actions. Panic is triggered by reminders of past traumatic events.

### Fight (confront)



Body prepares for physical activity by:

- Faster heart rate
- Faster breathing
- Tensed hands, arms, jaw
- Reduced blood flow to digestive system, causing stomach-ache, nausea, needing to go to the toilet
- Intense focus on danger and how to defeat the threat

### Flight (run away)



Body prepares for physical activity by:

- Faster heart rate
- Faster breathing
- Tensed leg muscles
- Reduced blood flow to digestive system, causing stomach-ache, nausea, needing to go to the toilet
- Fast thinking, attention focused on escape

### Freeze (shut down)



The body prepares to shut down by:

- Becoming still or frozen
- Fast thinking or unable to think
- Less sensation
- Numb emotions
- Inability to move
- Feeling faint and/or dizziness



## Signs of fear, tension, panic and hypervigilance you and your family may notice

- Being constantly alert for danger
- Restlessness and agitation, difficulty relaxing or sitting still
- Being easily startled by sudden noises
- Trouble falling asleep or frequent waking at night
- Increased irritability and anger over small events, arguing with loved ones
- Constant nervousness and fear, difficulty relaxing
- Racing thoughts
- Becoming easily agitated, frustrated or angry
- Difficulty trusting others and being fearful of people
- Fear of being alone
- Difficulty concentrating or learning new information, including a new language
- Frequent headaches, body aches and pains
- Racing heart, feeling sick, dry mouth, loss of appetite, difficulty speaking, sweating, trembling hands or legs

## Coping with fear, hypervigilance and panic

When practiced regularly, the exercises in *Factsheet 8B: Exercises to cope with fear, hypervigilance and panic* can help lower feelings of fear and slowly restore a sense of safety.

Sometimes our feelings of fear are very strong, and you may find these techniques difficult to do on your own. Talking to a QPASTT worker can help you to gradually learn these strategies and support you as you do them in a way that feels safe for you.

# Tension and relaxation

Holding muscle tension in our body is a common fear response to prepare the body to fight or run away.

When people have been under stress or fearful for long periods of time this tension can lead to headaches and other bodily aches and pains. This tension may also make people feel irritable, anxious, worry a lot, and be more sensitive so that they react to small events as if they were threatening. Many people may not even realise that they are tense.

By learning to relax your body you can start to shift feelings of fear and anxiety. What creates a sense of relaxation is unique to everybody.

**What is important is that you choose an activity that is relaxing for your body and your mind, and you practice this regularly.**

**What are the activities that you know help your body to relax?**

**Some examples of relaxing activities include:**



**Meditation**



**Prayer**



**Enjoying a favourite meal**



**Singing**



**Playing or listening to music**



**Being in nature**



**Going for a walk**



**Playing with children**



**Spending time with friends and family**



**Playing a sport or doing exercise**



**Reading**



**Watching a funny movie**



## EXERCISE: Progressive muscle relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation asks you to tense and then relax different muscles throughout your body.

**When practised regularly, it can reduce pain, improve sleep and help people achieve a very powerful feeling of calm.**

Your counsellor will be able to guide you through a progressive muscle relaxation exercise which you can practice at home, or you can use the simple instruction script below. You can record it on your phone and listen back to practise the exercise. If you record the script, make sure you leave extra time in between saying each instruction to give your body and mind the chance to follow along when you come to do the exercise.



Take a moment to sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes if you feel comfortable.

### 1 Take a deep breath



Breathe In through your nose. Hold it for a moment. Now slowly breathe out through your mouth. Let your body relax.

### 2 Focus on your hands



Squeeze them into fists. Hold the tension for a few seconds... and now, let them go. Feel the tension leaving your hands.

### 3 Move to your arms



Tighten your arms by bending your elbows and making your muscles firm. Hold the tension... and release. Notice how they feel softer and heavier.

### 4 Shift to your shoulders



Lift them up toward your ears. Hold the tension... and let them drop. Feel your shoulders relax completely.

### 5 Focus on your face



Scrunch your face, tightening your jaw, eyes, and forehead. Hold for a few seconds... and now, let go. Feel your face smooth and soft.

### 6 Next, your stomach



Tighten your stomach muscles like you're pulling your belly button in. Hold the tension... and release. Let your stomach feel calm.

### 7 Now your legs



Press your toes downward and tighten your thighs. Hold it... and let go. Feel the heaviness in your legs.

### 8 Finally, your feet.



Curl your toes and tighten your feet. Hold for a moment... and let go. Notice the ease spreading through your feet.

*Take one more deep breath in... and slowly exhale. When you are ready, gently open your eyes.*

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# Factsheet 8B: Exercises to cope with fear, hypervigilance and panic

## EXERCISE: Relaxed Breathing Method

Often when people are frightened or upset, they start to breathe faster. This is a natural survival response to prepare the body to fight or run away.

Sometimes our body can remain stuck on high alert and fast breathing can continue over a long period of time causing unpleasant physical sensations. Relaxed breathing is a simple technique that helps you slow down the body's survival response and is helpful in reducing our feelings of fear and panic.



**Practice the exercise below for at least 5-10 minutes each day.**

It may be difficult at first, but the more you practice the easier it will become. Practicing during times of ease will help your body more easily remember a sense of safety. This can help to reduce feelings of fear when they happen and can help you recover from an experience of panic more quickly.

### Step 1



Lie on your back or sit comfortably upright with both feet on the floor.

### Step 2



Place one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest.

### Step 3



- Breathe in for 4 seconds
- Hold for 4 seconds

### Step 4



Say the word 'relax' (or another calming word) every time you breath out for 6 seconds.

### Step 5



Continue breathing like this until all signs of fear, tension and panic have gone.



Sometimes the symptoms will return after a short while – that's normal. Just continue the Relaxed Breathing Method again for as long as is needed.

## EXERCISE: Notice five things



**Practice this technique throughout the day, especially any time you find yourself getting caught up in difficult thoughts and feelings.**

When we are feeling tense and afraid, we are caught up in difficult thoughts, memories, emotions and sensations related to the past or our fears for the future.

Bringing our focus to our sense of sight, sound, touch, smell and taste can be a quick and powerful way of bringing our attention back to the present moment where we are safe.

**Pause for a moment. Notice and name what you are experiencing (e.g. I am having a difficult memory, I have tightness in my chest). Then look around and name out loud the following:**



**5 things you can see**



**4 things you can hear**



**3 things you can touch**  
(or that you can feel on your skin)



**2 things you can smell**



**1 thing you can taste**

## EXERCISE: Remind yourself you are safe

Unwanted memories from the past and worry about the future can make you feel unsafe. A simple strategy you can practice daily is reminding yourself that you are safe now.

**Combining this with the Relaxed Breathing Method can be particularly helpful when practiced regularly.**



Remind yourself of where you are right now (e.g. I am in my bedroom, in my house, in Brisbane).



Remind yourself of when it is right now (e.g. It is 5pm on Sunday. It is the date/month/year).



Remind yourself how where you are right now is different to the past. Be specific.



**If you are not in a safe environment, consider reaching out to QPASTT or another service that you trust.**



# 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



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# 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.

## 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.

### **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

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# Factsheet 11: How to cope with strong emotions - anger

## Know your warning signs

Feelings of anger often grow in intensity. Knowing your body's cues that your anger is increasing can help you to stay in control. Common warning signs include:



**Feeling hot in the face**



**Raised voice**



**Clenched fists**



**Clenched jaw**



**Spitting**



**Sweating**



**Going quiet  
Feeling irritated  
or annoyed**



**Using  
aggressive  
body language**

When people have experienced violence or trauma, a common reaction is to experience sudden and intense feelings of anger, rage or to desire revenge. People may feel frightened by these feelings or confused about how to express them. Anger can be triggered by people, places or situations that remind you in some ways of the past, or it may seem to come out of nowhere at all.

Anger is a normal feeling that all people experience at times. However, many people view feelings of anger, rage and hatred as 'bad' or believe they should not be felt. Other people believe anger may be more acceptable to express than emotions like hurt or sadness. A person might show anger to hide other more painful or vulnerable emotions such as hurt, shame or fear.

Anger is not the same as violence or aggression. These are unhelpful ways to express strong feelings of anger that can lead to even further distress and problems. There are many ways to express anger that are not dangerous or hurtful to oneself or others.

## Finding safe ways to express your anger

**The first step in dealing with strong emotions is learning ways to express them safely. The following strategies have been helpful for survivors to cope with their feelings of anger.**

Turn over the page.



## EXERCISE: Shifting attention

If your feelings of anger are very strong and it is difficult to think or deal with the situation calmly, **try to shift your attention to the present moment and engage in a gentle, enjoyable activity for at least 30 minutes to give yourself time to calm down.** You will have a better chance of coping with your anger in a healthy way when you are calmer, and you can come back to deal with the source of your anger later.



**Taking 10 deep breaths**  
(see Relaxed Breathing Method over the page)



**Talk to a trusted person who you know helps calm you down**



**Take a cold shower or splash cold water on your face**



**Leave the situation**



**Watch a movie**



**Play a sport**



**Play an instrument or listen to music**



**Pray or engage in a faith-based activity**



**Engage in physical exercise for at least 20 minutes**  
(run, fast-paced walk, throw a ball)



**Play with a pet**



**Cook or bake**



## EXERCISE: Relaxed Breathing Method

Often when people are frightened or upset, they start to breathe faster. This is a natural survival response to prepare the body to fight or run away.

Sometimes our body can remain stuck on high alert and fast breathing can continue over a long period of time causing unpleasant physical sensations. Relaxed breathing is a simple technique that helps you slow down the body's survival response and is helpful in reducing our feelings of fear and panic.



**Practice the exercise below for at least 5-10 minutes each day.**

It may be difficult at first, but the more you practice the easier it will become. Practicing during times of ease will help your body more easily remember a sense of safety. This can help to reduce feelings of fear when they happen and can help you recover from an experience of panic more quickly.

### Step 1



Lie on your back or sit comfortably upright with both feet on the floor.

### Step 2



Place one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest.

### Step 3



- Breathe in for 4 seconds
- Hold for 4 seconds

### Step 4



Say the word 'relax' (or another calming word) every time you breath out for 6 seconds.

### Step 5



Continue breathing like this until all signs of fear, tension and panic have gone.



Sometimes the symptoms will return after a short while – that's normal. Just continue the Relaxed Breathing Method again for as long as is needed.

## EXERCISE: Keep a diary



**Keep a record of the times you feel anger.**

This will help you identify the patterns, warning signs and triggers to anger so you can better understand and manage these feelings when they occur.



Turn over the page.

## Tips for using a diary:

- Write in your diary when you are feeling angry or shortly after
- Describe what was happening before you felt anger
- Describe the situation that triggered the anger. Keep it factual. Describe only the events of what happened
- Describe the sensations you noticed in your body (e.g. my jaw is clenched, my heart is pounding)
- Describe what thoughts and feelings you experienced during the anger. What thoughts were going through your mind exactly? What were you saying to yourself?
- Reflect on the situation now that you have calmed down. Do you think differently than how you felt in the moment?



Writing down your thoughts and feelings can give you time to calm down and provide you with valuable information to cope with these feelings in the future.



**Lifeline (24 hours):**  
**13 11 14**

**Kids Help Line (24 hours):**  
**1800 55 1800**

**Queensland Mental Health**  
**Access Line:**  
**1300 642 255**

## When feelings of anger feel difficult to control

If your feelings of anger feel difficult to control and if you feel you are unable to keep yourself safe or fear hurting someone else, it is vital to seek help. Reach out to a counsellor, trusted friend or community member, or support person.

Below are some phone numbers of services in Australia that are available 24 hours per day, 7 days per week where there are people trained to understand these thoughts and help you in this situation. Interpreters are available if needed – just ask.



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# 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.

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# Factsheet 13: Understanding and managing poor sleep



## EXERCISE: Worry time



**If you find yourself worrying in the evening, choose a time during the evening in which you will give yourself 5-10 minutes to write about your worries. Be strict with the time limit.**

During the time, note down what you are worrying about or what makes you sad or anxious. Separate your worries to what is and what isn't in your control.

Inadequate or disrupted sleep is a common challenge, especially for those who have experienced trauma and stress. Memories about the past and worries about the future can interfere with sleep, leading to problems falling asleep, frequent waking, and disturbing dreams. Improving sleep quality is crucial for overall wellbeing.

## The impact of poor sleep

Poor sleep can affect our mood, thinking and daily actions. The quiet moments before sleep may bring forward thoughts about the past, or current worries you have, causing tension and restlessness. Disturbing dreams, flashbacks, or restlessness may disrupt your sleep, leaving you feeling fatigued and irritable the next day.



Once the time limit is done, stop (even if not finished). Put away any writing paper and acknowledge that you will deal with the issues within your control in the morning. Practice acceptance and letting go of the worries beyond your control.

# Strategies for improving sleep

## 1 Establish a relaxing bedtime routine:

Create a calming pre-sleep routine to signal to your body that it is time to wind down. This could include activities like reading, prayer, deep breathing, or taking a warm bath.



## 2 Reduce daytime stress:

Practice relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, gentle stretching, prayer or taking a daily walk. These activities can help to manage stress during the day, reducing its impact on sleep at nighttime.



## 3 Create a comfortable area for sleeping:

Ensure your sleeping space promotes rest by being dark, quiet, and at a comfortable temperature. Invest in a comfortable mattress and pillows and make sure curtains block out light.



## 4 Check for unhelpful habits:

Avoid daytime napping, scrolling on mobile phones or watching TV in bed. Limit alcohol, caffeine, and heavy meals before sleep—no caffeine after 2pm and no meals within 3 hours of bedtime.



## 5 Go to bed and wake up at the same time each day:

Go to bed and wake up at the same time daily. Consistency helps regulate your body's internal clock.



## 6 Other habits:

- Get out of bed if you can't sleep. Do something relaxing until you feel sleepy, then try again
- Accept a bad night's sleep. Remind yourself you can try again tomorrow
- Don't stress about not sleeping. Let go of the worry
- Avoid checking the clock. Set an alarm if needed to ease your mind
- Exercise daily. Aim for 30 minutes, but avoid it 3–4 hours before bed
- Do something calming. Try breathing exercises, mindfulness, prayer, or a sleep story app



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# Factsheet 14: Distressing dreams and nightmares

People who have experienced trauma may have distressing dreams or nightmares. After trauma, the brain tries to make sense of what happened. This can lead to strong memories or feelings showing up in dreams. Nightmares are a way for the brain to process and work through difficult experiences. They are not your fault and do not mean something is wrong with you.

Trauma affects the part of the brain that controls fear and memory. This can make dreams and nightmares feel very real, intense and hard to shake off.

Nightmares can involve reliving parts of the trauma, such as sights, sounds, or feelings from the event. Sometimes, the dreams may be different but still scary. For example, you might dream of being in danger or feeling trapped. You may wake up feeling scared, upset, or even confused. You may wake up and find yourself sweating or having difficulty breathing.

## What can help?



### Understanding

Remember that nightmares are common after trauma. They are your brain's way of trying to make sense of what has happened.



### Grounding techniques

If you wake up from a nightmare, try grounding yourself by focusing on your surroundings.

## EXERCISE: Notice five things



**Practice this technique throughout the day, especially any time you find yourself getting caught up in difficult thoughts and feelings.**



When we are feeling tense and afraid, we are caught up in difficult thoughts, memories, emotions and sensations related to the past or our fears for the future.

Bringing our focus to our sense of sight, sound, touch, smell and taste can be a quick and powerful way of bringing our attention back to the present moment where we are safe.

Pause for a moment. Notice and name what you are experiencing (e.g. I am having a difficult memory, I have tightness in my chest). Then look around and name out loud the following:

Turn over the page.





## EXERCISE: Notice five things



**5** things you can see (e.g. window, door, ceiling, trees, hands)



**4** things you can hear (e.g. raining, bird chirping, traffic sound, breathing)



**3** things you can touch or that you can feel on your skin (e.g. blanket)



**2** things you can smell (e.g. perfume, shampoo)



**1** thing you can taste (e.g. garlic bread from last meal)

## EXERCISE: Remind yourself you are safe

Unwanted memories from the past and worry about the future can make you feel unsafe. A simple strategy you can practice daily is reminding yourself that you are safe now.

**Combining this with the Relaxed Breathing Method can be particularly helpful when practiced regularly.**



Remind yourself of where you are right now (e.g. I am in my bedroom, in my house, in Brisbane).



Remind yourself of when it is right now (e.g. It is 5pm on Sunday. It is the date/month/year).



Remind yourself how where you are right now is different to the past. Be specific.



If you are not currently in a safe environment, consider reaching out to QPASTT or another trusted service for help and support. You can also try the **Dual Awareness exercise** in *Factsheet 7: Understanding and coping with frightening memories (flashbacks)*

## EXERCISE: Relaxed Breathing Method

Often when people are frightened or upset, they start to breathe faster. This is a natural survival response to prepare the body to fight or run away.

Sometimes our body can remain stuck on high alert and fast breathing can continue over a long period of time causing unpleasant physical sensations. Relaxed breathing is a simple technique that helps you slow down the body's survival response and is helpful in reducing our feelings of fear and panic.



**Practice the exercise below for at least 5-10 minutes each day.**

It may be difficult at first, but the more you practice the easier it will become. Practicing during times of ease will help your body more easily remember a sense of safety. This can help to reduce feelings of fear when they happen and can help you recover from an experience of panic more quickly.

### Step 1



Lie on your back or sit comfortably upright with both feet on the floor.

### Step 2



Place one hand on your stomach and the other on your chest.

### Step 3



- Breathe in for 4 seconds
- Hold for 4 seconds

### Step 4



Say the word 'relax' (or another calming word) every time you breath out for 6 seconds.

### Step 5



Continue breathing like this until all signs of fear, tension and panic have gone.



Sometimes the symptoms will return after a short while – that's normal. Just continue the Relaxed Breathing Method again for as long as is needed.



You can also try the Progressive Muscle Relaxation in *Factsheet 8: Understanding and coping with fear, tension, panic and hypervigilance*.



## EXERCISE: Resetting after a nightmare

This exercise allows you to acknowledge the fear you have experienced during a nightmare or dream and affirm that the past event is not happening now.

**Write or say this exercise aloud before you go to sleep and at the time of waking up from a distressing dream:**

TODAY (OR IN THE PAST) I HAVE BEEN REALLY SCARED OF: \_\_\_\_\_

SO, I MIGHT HAVE A NIGHTMARE AND WAKE UP FEELING: \_\_\_\_\_

MY HEART MIGHT BEAT FAST, AND I MIGHT BE SHAKING OR CRYING. IF THAT HAPPENS, I WILL TELL MYSELF IT IS BECAUSE I AM REMEMBERING: (KEEP BRIEF) \_\_\_\_\_

THEN I WILL TURN ON THE LIGHT AND LOOK AROUND MY ROOM AND NAME THE THINGS IN THE ROOM THAT I SEE. \_\_\_\_\_

AND I WILL TELL MYSELF THAT I JUST HAD A NIGHTMARE AND THAT \_\_\_\_\_ IS NOT HAPPENING NOW.



You may need to repeat this a few times to be able to return to sleep.

### Remember:

Improving sleep is a gradual process. Seeking support, especially from a specialist/trauma counsellor, can provide personalised strategies and help you navigate challenges in a safe and supportive way.

**To speak with QPASTT or find out more about our services, please call 07 3391 6677 or visit [qpastt.org.au](http://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.

# Factsheet 15: What is counselling and how can it help?

Counselling is a private and safe space where you can share worries and concerns with a person who is trained to listen and help you find solutions. Your counsellor can also connect you to support for practical problems and help you to understand how Australia works.

What is discussed is confidential to only you and the counsellor (and an interpreter if needed). It is not discussed with anyone else without your permission (unless there is danger to your life or someone else's).

**QPASTT counsellors are caring and compassionate and are specially trained to work with people who have experienced torture and refugee-related trauma. They understand how trauma and adjustment to a new culture may be affecting you and are trained to support you to cope and thrive in Australia.**







## How can counselling help you?

Counselling can help you to feel safe and restore a sense of hope and meaning in your life.

A counsellor may work with you to find possible solutions to your problems or strategies that help you cope with painful or unpleasant symptoms you are experiencing. Counselling may also help you express difficult emotions in a way that feels safe and supported so they no longer impact upon you.

QPASTT counsellors can also support you if you are experiencing barriers living in Australia. QPASTT counsellors can advocate to help you to achieve your basic needs and link you in with other services.

We understand that healing takes courage and time. We can support you for however long it takes for you on your recovery journey.

**Many people think that counselling has something to do with being mentally ill. They may be reluctant to access counselling because they do not want to be viewed in that way.**

**The types of symptoms that survivors experience are often very normal reactions to the terrible events that they have experienced.**

**When survivors are helped – through counselling – to understand their reactions and the reasons they occur it can be very reassuring for them to learn that many of these responses are normal and not a sign of mental illness.**

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# Factsheet 16: What is counselling for children, young people and families?

Many children and young people from refugee backgrounds have experienced direct or indirect trauma because of persecution and conflict. Additionally, if people do not have the opportunity to heal from trauma, they can unknowingly pass its impacts on to future generations. Their children may experience high levels of stress, difficulties with attachment and disconnection from their culture and community.



**QPASTT's work with families, children and young people focuses on ensuring trauma is not a barrier to growing, learning and thriving in Australia.**





# Counselling for children and young people

QPASTT has counsellors who specialise in supporting children and young people. They partner with parents to help children and young people make sense of the things they have experienced and adapt to life in Australia. QPASTT also runs a range of groups and activities for children and young people.

Children often have difficulty using words to express their thoughts and feeling and counsellors use a range of ways to help. This includes art, play, games and movement to help the children not only process their traumatic memories, but to assist with their physical, sensory and cognitive development.

Play is a child's language and toys are their words. We help children heal in the way that is the most natural to them. This is why it is important that they be included in the counselling process.

## Parents can help by:

- assisting their child or young person to get to appointments
- meeting with the child/young person's counsellor to help them understand what is happening in the home
- working with the counsellors to find the solutions that will be the best for their child or young person

*QPASTT values the wisdom of parents and will therefore not work with children and young people under the age of 16 without parental consent.*







**There is no time limit for QPASTT counselling.**

Our counsellors can work with you and your child or young person until all goals for counselling have been achieved.

## What to expect when your child or young person is referred for counselling:

- An intake worker will visit with you to understand the needs of your family and make referrals to other services as appropriate
- The counsellor may also visit the child or young person at school and speak to their teachers to understand how the child or young person is functioning in the school environment
- Your child/young person's name will then be placed on a waitlist for counselling
- Once your child/young person has been allocated a counsellor, the counsellor will most likely meet with you before they meet with your child, to get a better understanding of how they can assist. They will set goals with you for the counselling so that everyone is aware of what is being worked on in sessions
- The counsellor will meet with your child and young person on a regular basis to work toward these goals
- The counsellor will meet with you regularly to let you know how your child/young person is progressing in counselling, ask about changes you are seeing at home and talk about strategies that can be implemented at home to help you and your child reach the goals you have set



# How trauma affects families

The challenges of settlement along with experiences of trauma can impact the mental health and wellbeing of all family members and future generations.

Some of the effects of trauma and settlement on families can include:

- Understanding different cultural norms and expectations in Australia
- The impact of trauma for individuals within the family – parents/carers, children and young people (see *Factsheet 3: The impact of trauma on adults* and *Factsheet 4: The impact of trauma for children and young people*)
- Changes to caretaking roles
- Challenges caring for children and teenagers, especially through transitions
- Stress in parent relationships
- Feeling isolated and disconnected, and not knowing where or how to seek help



## Support for parents and families

Parenting in a new country can be hard. Parents and young people can struggle with understanding the different cultural expectations and norms in Australia. Children often learn English and understand Australian systems and culture more quickly than their parents, which can lead to conflict. QPASTT has specialised programs for parents and carers to support them to navigate these challenges in a culturally safe way and help families thrive.

## Family counselling

At QPASTT, counsellors specially trained to work with families can provide support for families to:

- Strengthen relationships
- Improve communication and understanding between family members
- Find solutions to their challenges

- Reflect on their challenges of caring for children in a different cultural context
- Understand the impacts of trauma on family dynamics

Family counselling can take place with one family member or multiple generations. It can take place in one of our offices and other settings where appropriate.

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#### **BRISBANE**

**P: 07 3391 6677**

Brisbane Multicultural Centre  
28 Dibley Street,  
Woolloongabba, QLD 4102

#### **LOGAN**

**P: 07 3089 4310**

19/390 Kingston Road,  
Slacks Creek, QLD 4127

#### **TOOWOOMBA**

**P: 07 3391 6677**

Toowoomba Multicultural Centre  
15 Snell Street (cnr Russell Street),  
Toowoomba, QLD 4350

#### **TOWNSVILLE**

**P: 07 3391 6677**

410 Ross River Road,  
Cranbrook, QLD 4814

#### **CAIRNS**

**P: 07 3391 6677**

36 Abbott St,  
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