



# Trauma

## About trauma

A traumatic event is something that threatens your life or safety, or the lives of people around you. It is an experience that is stressful and has a significant impact on your emotional state.

A traumatic event might be a natural disaster such as a bushfire, flood or earthquake, or it might be as a result of a serious accident, a physical or sexual assault, losing someone close to you, or something else. Trauma can also be experienced across many repeated traumatic

events (such as abuse, neglect or violence over time).

Trauma might be very different to anything you've experienced before and it can be hard to make sense of. Experiencing trauma might leave you with many questions about your safety and your control over your life. It can be especially difficult to deal with these feelings if you're also dealing with other changes in your life, like getting a job, managing relationships, or moving out of home.

# 65%

of Australians have experienced a traumatic event



Some trauma in life is common, with up to 65% of Australians experiencing a traumatic event at some stage in their lives<sup>1</sup>. Young people respond to traumatic events in different ways and this depends on their past experiences, personality, levels of support and the nature of the event so there is no 'right' way to respond. Most people affected by trauma make a good recovery but some will have longer-term problems.

Getting support soon after the traumatic experience can make a big difference to your recovery.

## Effects of trauma

It's normal to experience strong emotions and feelings after a traumatic event. These can include:



**Emotional numbness and detachment** – feeling cut off from what happened, other people, and yourself



**Shock and disbelief** – that the event has happened



**Fear** – of death or injury, being alone, not being able to cope, or the event happening again



**Helplessness** – feeling that you have no control



**Guilt or shame** – for not having stopped the event, or for being better off than others, or for not reacting better or coping well enough



**Sadness** – for things that have gone or been lost



**Isolation** – feeling that no-one understands or can help



**Elation** – joy at being alive and safe



**Anger and frustration** – about the event, or the unfairness of it



**Re-experiencing the event** – through dreams, flashbacks or thoughts



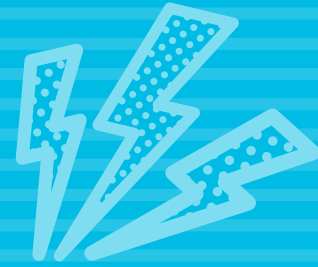
**Changes in relationships** – some people might seem unsupportive or unavailable, while others might seem closer than before.

Other common experiences include:

- Headaches
- Changes in appetite and weight
- A racing heart
- Shaking or sweating
- Trouble sleeping
- Difficulty concentrating
- Emotional changes, like mood swings, anxiety, or a quick temper
- Difficulty with school or work
- Withdrawal from friends and family
- Problems keeping up with normal daily activities
- Risk-taking, including increased use of alcohol and other drugs
- Avoiding situations that remind you of past trauma
- Being overly alert or watchful.

Reactions like these are normal and most people find that they gradually feel better over time – usually in the days and weeks after the event.

# Trauma



## Looking after yourself

Life can be chaotic, unsettling and confusing after a traumatic event so it is important to do things to look after yourself. These include:

- **Talking to people about your experiences** and trying to understand what it was like for other people too (but only when you feel ready)
- **Getting support from people you trust**, including your friends, family or teachers by letting them know how you are feeling
- **Making time for exercise and rest**, and for activities that you enjoy.
- **Deciding what media coverage you can cope with**; avoid watching or reading about it if you find it upsetting
- **Getting back into your usual routines**, like returning to work, school, sports and other activities



## What are post-traumatic mental health problems?

Most people begin to recover from a traumatic experience in the following few weeks. Some people though have continuing symptoms of distress, or find that their symptoms are getting worse. This can increase the risk of developing mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or harmful levels of alcohol and other drug use.

## When to get help

It's important to get help if you are experiencing any of the effects of trauma that:

- Last for more than two weeks
- Are getting worse
- Are interfering with school, work, your relationships or activities that you enjoy
- Are distressing or upsetting
- Make you think of harming yourself or someone else.

If symptoms of trauma are left untreated they can worsen over time and have a significant impact on your life. Getting help early can lessen the impact of mental health problems on your life and improve the chances of recovering fully.



.....→ **Finding help** ←.....

If you need some help it's important to find someone to support you that you trust and feel comfortable with. There are many general practitioners (GPs) and other health professionals that can help with your recovery. Many of them have worked with young people who have experienced trauma and will be able to help you deal with the stress and help you with recovery.

A good place to start might be your local community health centre or **headspace** centre, or you might want to talk with a trusted friend, teacher or family member about someone they can recommend. Remember that you won't need to talk about the details of the experience unless you feel completely comfortable and safe.



**headspace**  
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre or for online and telephone support, visit [headspace.org.au](https://headspace.org.au)

**References:** <sup>1</sup>Creamer et al. (2001), Post-traumatic stress disorder: findings from the Australian National Survey of Mental Health and Well-being, Psychological Medicine, 2001; 31 (7):1237-1247. <https://digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/2440/6593/1/hdl6593.pdf>

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