



# COPING WITH TRAUMA

For adult survivors of child sexual abuse

# Coping with trauma

No two people's experience of trauma as a result of abuse is the same. It is important to acknowledge this and learn about how it affects you in your daily life. By taking the first step, learning about trauma and exploring our top tips to tackle it, you are giving yourself the best opportunity of moving forward and gaining control over your life. In cases involving child sexual abuse, trauma may manifest itself in a person's behaviour in different ways and at different levels of debilitation. How you are feeling is valid and the purpose of this workbook is to empower you through knowledge, enabling you to take control.

This workbook contains lots of information, so please take it at your own pace. If you would prefer to view this information online, or view interactive information, visit My Support Space ([mysupportspace.org.uk](https://mysupportspace.org.uk)). If you need to speak to someone for support, you can call our free confidential service, Supportline, any time on **08 08 16 89 111**.

## What is trauma?

Trauma is the effect of experiencing upsetting, frightening, and stressful events. Emotional and/or psychological trauma, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), is an outcome of experiencing either situations or events that we as individuals find traumatic.



### THINKING TIME

How many of the following are you experiencing?



- Difficulties in maintaining loving and trusting relationships
- A low sense of self-worth and low self esteem
- Sexual difficulties
- Depression and anxiety
- Substance abuse
- Self-harm and/or suicidal thoughts
- Eating disorders
- Fear of your abuser
- Feeling isolated
- Guilt or shame
- Nightmares and trouble sleeping
- Constantly feeling unsafe
- A sense of helplessness and powerlessness
- Feelings of betrayal – by the person who abused you as well as anyone you think should have been there to protect you as a child
- Flashbacks from known or unknown triggers
- Anger
- A difficulty trusting others
- Dissociative Identity Disorder.

## IDEAS TIME

Rank the issues you identified with in order of difficulty, starting with those you are finding most difficult.



## Most difficult

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This will vary from person to person, and there are many things you can do to help you to manage what you are experiencing, such as:

- Sharing the way you are feeling with someone you can trust, someone who will listen
- Seeking out support networks that you have already built or can establish
- Writing things down – thoughts, feelings, nightmares
- Expressing experiences and feelings through music, poetry and/or art
- Engaging in counselling to work through what happened
- Thinking with your ‘adult head’ not your ‘child head’. Talking to your child head.
- Exercising or engaging in physical activities that release tension in your body and mind
- Taking self-defence classes
- Meditating or carrying out another form of meditative exercise, such as yoga
- During a flashback, wrapping yourself in a blanket and securing your boundaries
- Reminding yourself that you are a survivor, not a victim
- Creating a safe box of positive memories, pictures, keepsakes, textures and smells that you love, which you can go to whenever you need to
- Be kind and caring to yourself.

## IDEAS TIME

How many of these things are you doing? Tick them off and create a list of all the things you could or would like to try.



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## Least difficult

## What are flashbacks?

Flashbacks are instances in which a survivor of child sexual abuse suffers acute recollections of the past, often relating to moments of trauma and suffering. During these, the individual will experience visual images, sounds, smells and feelings (or numbing). These flashbacks may come with no visual recollection or sounds; instead, they may involve a wave of panic, powerlessness or the sense of feeling trapped without any knowledge of why. They may also occur in a person's dreams.

Flashbacks occur due to the traumatic abuse you suffered as a child and the way in which you coped by locking that part away. That abused child is always inside, and flashbacks occur when that child emerges in the present moment, forcing the adult survivor to return to that moment as a child undergoing the abuse all over again. The adult self is forgotten, meaning that the ability to protect and ground oneself is overcome, the results of which are incredibly upsetting to the individual experiencing the flashback. This is not only due to the experience of reliving the trauma, but also due to the vulnerability caused by such an uncontrollable sensation coming out of the blue.

## Knowing the signs and triggers

- Recognising the warning signs: while flashbacks feel like they come out of nowhere and catch you off guard, there are often physiological or emotional warning signs that appear first, such as tightness in the chest, mood swings or sweating.
- Knowing your triggers: flashbacks may be caused by something you see, touch, hear or smell. It could be a song, a moment of stress that is unrelated to the flashback, a phrase or even the smell of a perfume or cologne. It could be an emotional memory, not just a sensory one.



### IDEAS TIME

Do you recognise any warning signs or triggers?  
List them.



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# What are panic attacks?

A panic attack is an exaggeration of the body's normal response to fear. Your heart starts to beat faster, you have trouble breathing, and you may even feel like you are going to faint. A panic attack can develop very quickly and will usually reach its peak within 5-10 minutes. The length of an attack can vary hugely; it typically lasts between 5 and 30 minutes, but the after-effects may last longer. Panic attacks can happen anywhere and at any time. Although panic attacks are extremely unpleasant, they cannot harm you mentally or physically. Panic attacks may come unexpectedly, but they are always triggered by something.

Finding the trigger will help you manage the attacks.

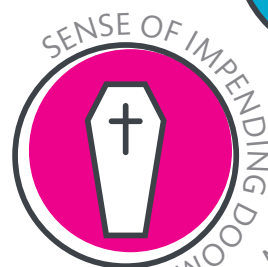
## Signs of a panic attack:

- Heart palpitations
- Difficulty breathing or hyperventilation
- Dizziness and feeling faint
- Chills and hot flushes
- Dry mouth
- A sense of impending doom
- Clamminess
- Muscle tension
- Pins and needles
- Depersonalisation: best described as feeling like you are not there or are not connected to your body
- Sweating.

## Top tips for coping with flashbacks and panic attacks

When you start to experience a flashback or experience signs of a panic attack, the most important thing to do is to get grounded. You can achieve this by doing the following:

- Tell yourself that you are having a flashback. Say it out loud.
- Remind yourself that you are safe. You are not a child again and those days are over. These are memories of the past.
- Stamp your feet. Remind yourself that you are grounded and that you can move.
- Talk to the child inside of you - the child that experienced the abuse - and tell them that this is a flashback, that you are okay and that you are safe.
- Secure your boundaries. Take yourself to somewhere you feel safe. Wrap yourself in a blanket so that you feel secure.
- Breathe. Concentrate on breathing in and out. Control your breathing. Breathe in and hold for two, breathe out and hold for two.





Another important tip for coping is to get moving. You can try doing some of the following:

- Get your feet moving. Stamp them on the floor and feel the sensation. Acknowledge that you have freedom to move and that you are not trapped.
- Go for a walk. Acknowledge the movement of your arms and legs.
- Move your shoulders and loosen up your muscles, releasing the tension from your body.
- Clap your hands together. Rub them together to release the tension from your fingers.

## Finally, check your senses

Check your five senses out loud:

- **Smell:** what can you smell? Pick up something you like and smell it deeply, holding onto the scent, and control your breathing. Smell is the fastest way to calm your nerves.
- **Touch:** what can you touch around you? How do your clothes feel? How about the chair that you are sitting on? Hold something cold or something warm and focus on the sensation of it.
- **Sight:** what can you see around you? Describe out loud all the things that you can see around you.
- **Taste:** can you taste anything? Think about something you recently ate or your favourite thing to eat. Describe how it tastes and why you like it.
- **Sounds:** what can you hear? Pick out all the different sounds you can hear. Pick them out one by one and focus on them.

## Try the 5,4,3,2,1 technique

Focus on five things you can see, four you can touch, three you can hear, two you can smell and one you can taste – think, touch, hear, smell, taste.

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### IDEAS TIME

Can you list five things you can see, four you can touch, three you can hear, two you can smell and one you can taste? Write a list of those things.



## Distraction box

Make a distraction box full of things that you like to touch, favourite smells and happy memories. The box could include pictures of fun days out, pictures of important people in your life, sentimental letters to read or an object that has a special story behind it. You can also include a list in the box that reminds you of grounding techniques that work for you, which you can use as a checklist.



### IDEAS TIME

What would you put in your distraction box? Why not make a list of all your favourite things? What things make you happy?



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## Feel in control

In moments where you begin to feel out of control, carry out activities that put you back into a position of control.

It's important to find a grounding technique that works for you, so practise a routine using the pointers given, so you know what to do and feel comfortable with how you will manage your panic attack when it happens. Always remember that this will pass and that learning to manage the panic will make you feel more in control.

## Understanding how I react to stress

Other than flashbacks and panic attacks, there are other ways in which we respond to moments of stress. One such way is through dissociation.

## What is dissociation?

Many people, if not all people, experience moments of dissociation in their lives without having experienced sexual abuse as a child. A person may be driving home from work while thinking about their day, and when they arrive home, they realise that they do not remember a portion of their journey. This is dissociation; a period in which your mind is not in the present.

### IDEAS TIME

Create a to-do list for today, then for the next day. Think about what you have done over the last week, places you have been and people you have seen. If you have not left the house, think about other things you have done indoors, then think about what you want to do. Write this down.



### To do:

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For people who have experienced trauma, such as child sexual abuse, disassociation may be the way their mind copes with stress. It would have been how they coped during the abuse, and how they now cope as an adult when triggers induce flashbacks. Moments of disassociation can last minutes, hours or days; they may even last as weeks or months.

If a period of disassociation continues for a very long time, especially as a child, there is the potential for a dissociative disorder to develop. This means that instead of occasionally disassociating for a short period of time after experiencing stress, a person will disassociate as a primary response to stress, and this is out of their control.



It is important to recognise that some people actively choose to disassociate as a coping mechanism and a way of calming down from stress. This could be in the form of exercising, completing a jigsaw or meditation. Separating body and mind from the now is actively practised by many religions.

## IDEAS TIME

What ways do you like to dissociate in a positive way? How do you think they help you to manage stress positively?



A survivor of child sexual abuse may find that they have large gaps in their memories relating to their childhood. These are clinically defined as being moments of dissociative amnesia.

You might lose your sense of personal identity and travel away from your home or place of work, often getting confused by who you are, and potentially taking on a new identity. This is known as dissociative fugue.

If a person suffers from dissociative identity disorder, this will include the existence of multiple identities within one individual.



You may experience some or all of the following:

- Each identity might have different patterns of thinking.
- Each identity might be a different gender and age.
- You might have one main identity and subparts with different identities.
- Your different identities might have conflicting memories and experiences.
- You might not have control over which identities are present.
- You may experience amnesia when other identities are in charge.
- Your identities might each have different needs requiring different coping techniques.



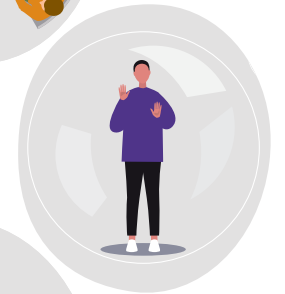
# Top tips for coping with disassociation and dissociative disorders

As mentioned earlier, disassociation is practised by many and can be a way of managing stress in a positive way. If you feel like you do not have control over your periods of disassociation and are concerned that you may have or are developing a dissociative disorder, here are some tips to help you manage and know what to do next:

- **Keep a diary:** keeping a note of what you experience can help you remember what happened at a later date and track the frequency of your dissociative episodes. It can also highlight differences in any identity states and bring a closer connection between them.
- **Visualisation:** by visualising yourself in a safe, calm place, or being surrounded by an invisible shield, you can use your imagination to create a state or situation in which you no longer feel at risk. It can also be a place you internally visualise to keep thoughts and feelings that you struggle to manage. If you have multiple identities, you can visualise a place for them to meet to create a closer union.
- **Talk to others:** reach out to others through support groups, so that you can speak to people who have experienced the same thing as you. Support groups | PODS support ([pods-online.org.uk](http://pods-online.org.uk))
- **Use grounding techniques:** see the section on flashbacks.
- **Self-care:** the ability to cope with difficulties in daily life are hard enough without

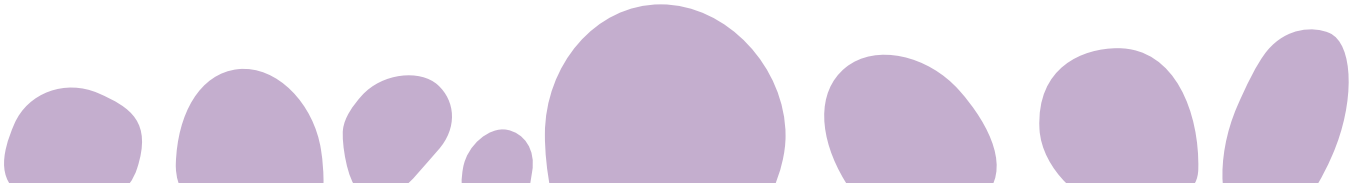
having the additional pressure of coping with trauma and the effects of it. There are several things you can do to take care of yourself and help you manage more effectively; try to get enough sleep, make sure you are mindful of your diet, as skipping meals and having a low blood sugar level can affect your energy levels and your ability to manage your mood, and, finally, exercise. Exercise is great for mental wellbeing and for your physical health.

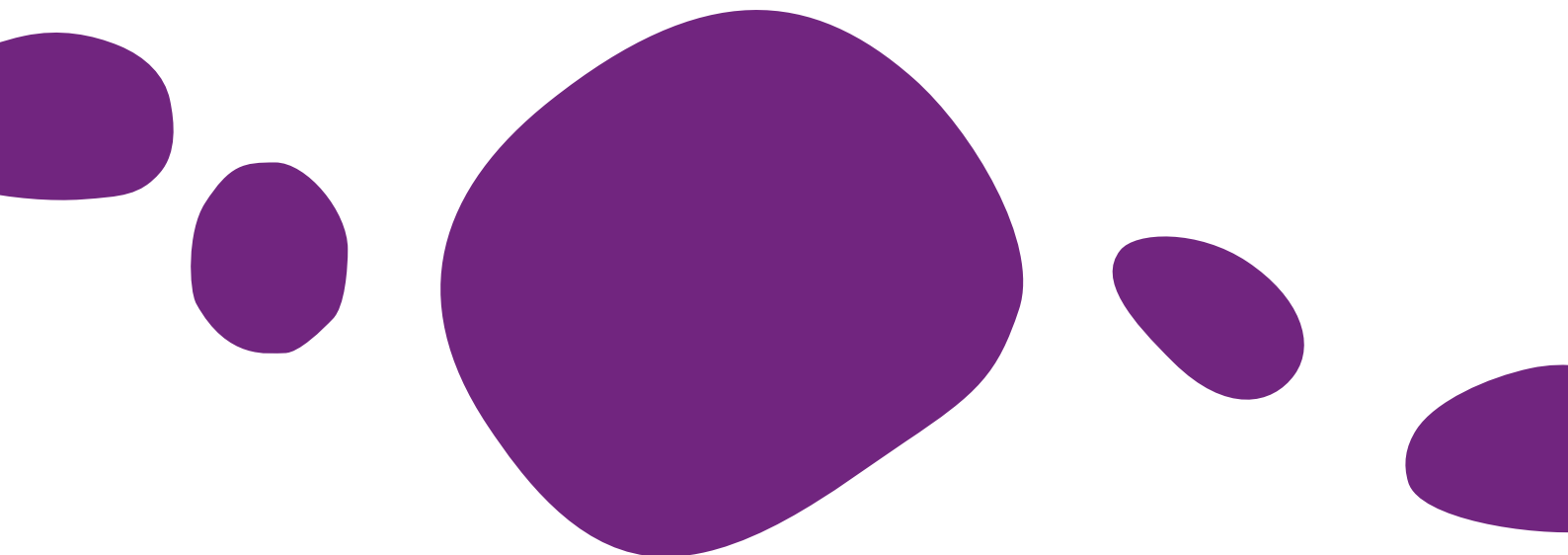
- **Small efforts:** make sure you wear a watch, so that you can keep track of the time and date, leave notes to yourself on sticky notes and place these around your home and car, and try keeping lists of the names and contact details of friends and family in easily accessible places.
- **Make a crisis plan:** while you may never need it, writing a statement of your wishes in case you ever become so unwell that you cannot make important decisions is a useful way of safeguarding your voice. Further reading: emergency DID information cards | Carolyn Spring





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