

Supporting people who have
experienced traumatic events - toolkit

NCMH
National Centre for Mental Health

Toolkit

Supporting people who have experienced traumatic events



Ymchwil Iechyd
a Gofal Cymru
Health and Care
Research Wales



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Toolkit

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Relaxing your breathing

- 1 Breathe in slowly and steadily for a count of three through your nose
- 2 Breathe out slowly and steadily for a count of six through your mouth
- 3 When you breathe out, try to push the air out so your tummy expands, rather than your chest
- 4 If your attention wanders off from your breathing then just gently bring it back to your breath
- 5 Repeat for a few minutes until you notice that you are feeling calmer

It is helpful to practise relaxing your breathing regularly when you are feeling calm and safe.

This makes it easier to use the technique when you are feeling anxious and panicky.

Relaxing your body

- 1 Start by getting into a comfortable position
- 2 Breathe in slowly and steadily for a count of three through your nose
- 3 Breathe out slowly and steadily for a count of six through your mouth
- 4 Do this a few times until your breathing has become slow and regular
- 5 Then send your attention to your feet.
- 6 As you breathe in, curl your toes down and press your feet into the floor
- 7 As you breathe out, relax your toes
- 8 You can repeat this step a few times if you like
- 9 Then breathe in again and as you do, tighten up the muscles in your legs by pushing your legs together
- 10 As you breathe out, try to relax your legs completely
- 11 You can repeat this step a few times if you like
- 12 Then move to the tummy muscles, tightening them up as you breathe in and relaxing them as you breathe out
- 13 Then move to the arms, bending them at the elbow and tightening all of the muscles from the fingers to the shoulders, before relaxing them completely
- 14 Then move to the shoulders, hunching them up towards your ears before letting go
- 15 Lastly tighten all the muscles in your face before letting go and relaxing

Reminders of my trauma

You can use this Tool to record the things that trigger memories or flashbacks of the traumatic event.

These things are often **sensory** reminders of the trauma.

- Things that you can **see** such as images in newspapers or particular objects or people
- Things that you can **hear** such as footsteps, doors slamming or particular music
- Things that you can **smell** such as aftershave, sweat or petrol
- Things that you can **taste** such as particular types of food
- Things that you **touch** such as when people brush past you
- The reminders might also be **feelings and sensations** that you experienced at the time of the trauma, such as a racing heart or feeling sick.

My senses

Specific examples of my triggers

Things that I can see

Things that I can hear

Things that I can smell

Things that I can touch

Things that I can taste

Feelings and sensations

Grounding using my senses

Once you have noticed what your sensory triggers for the trauma memories are, you can start to think of some ways of bringing yourself back to the present time and reminding yourself that you are safer now.

This involves focusing on what you can notice around you, and it helps to use all of your senses.

Things that I can see

Focus on what you can see around you in the room or in your surroundings. These might be objects such as pictures or furniture. If you are outside, focus on things like shop fronts, road signs, or cars. These are things that will help to remind you of where you are, and that you are in the present time.

You could also look at photographs of yourself in Wales, or pictures of friends or family on your phone, which will help to remind you that are safe and that you have survived.

Things that I can feel or touch

Focus on things with different textures, such as clothing or shiny surfaces such as tabletops.

You can also have particularly comforting objects ready to touch, such as stress balls or pebbles

Things that I can hear

Focus on the noises around you in the present moment, which will help to remind you of where you are. These might be voices talking in English, the sound of a computer, or the sound of cars going by.

You can also listen to some music that reminds you of where you are and that you are safer now.

Things that I can smell

You can have some things with you that have strong smells, such as Vicks or smelling salts, or smells that you particularly like, such as coffee or perfume.

Things that I can taste

Things with strong flavours are good, such as mints.

Things that I can do

Things that you can do might include being able to move around, stand up or leave the room.

Steps for helping when someone is having a flashback or is dissociating

- Although it is alarming, try to stay calm if someone is having a flashback or is dissociating
- Gently tell them that they are having a flashback
- Remind them of where they are and what the date is
- Encourage them to breathe slowly and deeply using their relaxed breathing skill
- Encourage them to describe their surroundings
- Encourage them to use their grounding strategies to bring them back into the present
- Remind them that the frightening event is over, that they survived and that they are safe.

Balanced activity planner

It is helpful to think of some activities in advance to make a note of them in your planner.

These might be things that you used to enjoy but have given up since the traumatic event, or things that might make you feel better.

It is a good idea to have a few ideas in each of these different columns, as these are all important for your wellbeing.

My relaxing/ comforting activities

Eg watching a
favourite film

My social activities

Meeting up with a
friend for coffee

My achievement activities

Registering with a
dentist

Managing my anger and other strong emotions

- Recognise the early warning signs of anger and strong emotions – it might help people to think of these as being like a thermometer.
- It can feel as though it boils straight up to 100 degrees, but people can learn to spot sensations or feelings that will give them an 'early warning system'
- Recognise the triggers for anger and other strong emotions
- Imagine surfing your feelings like waves
- Prepare for how you will handle these situations, and what you will do if they don't go according to plan.
- Take time-out from the situation if you need to calm down
- Use your Relaxed Breathing (Tool 1) or Relaxed Body (Tool 2) techniques to calm down the threat system and teach the brain that you are safe
- Talking about it with someone else can help people calm down and think about what was really happening in the situation.
- Taking regular exercise helps to reduce stress

Notes

Help with our mental health research

We are working to better understand mental health problems. The aim of our research is to improve diagnosis, treatment and support for the future.

But to do this we need **your** help.

Helping with our research is easy. It involves completing an online survey which should take around 10-15 minutes to complete. It asks questions about your:

- personal information, like date of birth and ethnicity
- mental and physical health
- lifestyle

To take part, visit ncmh.info/help or contact us:

 info@ncmh.info

 **02920 688401**

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