Coping with Traumatic Stress Reactions

Adapted from the “Coping with Traumatic Stress Reactions; A National Centre for PTSD Fact Sheet” Pamela Swales, PHD, Department of Veterans Affairs

The Importance of Active Coping

When you have been exposed to a traumatic event, you are likely to experience a range of stress reactions that can have a significant impact on your day-to-day life. Taking direct action to cope with these stress reactions and trauma-related problems means putting yourself in a position of power. Active coping makes you begin to feel less helpless and instead, feel like you are moving towards recovery from the effects of trauma.

- Active coping means recognising and accepting the impact of trauma on your life and taking direct action to improve things.
- Active coping occurs even when there is no crisis; coping is an attitude and a habit that must be strengthened.

Understanding the Recovery Process

Knowing how recovery happens will give you a better understanding of the recovery process and an opportunity to engage in some active strategies to assist in recovery.

- Recovery is an ongoing, daily, gradual process. It is not a matter of suddenly being cured.
- Some amount of continued reaction to the traumatic event(s) is normal and reflects a normal body and mind. Healing doesn't mean forgetting traumatic experiences or having no emotional pain when thinking about them.
- Healing may mean fewer symptoms, symptoms that are less disturbing, greater confidence in your ability to cope with your memories and reactions, or an improved ability to manage your emotions.

Coping with Traumatic Stress Reactions: Behaviours that DON'T Help

These are behaviours you should not use to cope.

- Using drugs and alcohol to reduce anxiety, help you relax, help you to stop thinking about distressing experiences, or to help you go to sleep. Alcohol and drug use cause more problems than they cure.
- Keeping away from other people. Social isolation means loss of support, friendship, and closeness with others, and more time to worry or feel hopeless and alone.
- Dropping out of pleasurable or recreational activities. This leads to fewer opportunities to feel good and feel a sense of achievement.
- Using anger to control others. Anger helps keep other people away. Anger may keep bad emotions away temporarily, but it also keeps away positive connections and help from loved ones.
- Trying to constantly avoid people, places, or thoughts that are reminders of the traumatic event. Avoiding thoughts about the trauma or treatment doesn't keep away distress, and it prevents you from making progress on coping with stress reactions.
- Working all the time to try to avoid distressing memories of the trauma (becoming a “workaholic”).
Coping with Traumatic Stress Reactions: Behaviours that CAN Help

There are many ways you can cope with post-traumatic stress. Here are some things you can do if you have any of the following symptoms:

Unwanted distressing memories, images, or thoughts

- Remind yourself that they are just that, memories.
- Remind yourself that it is natural to have some memories of the traumatic event(s).
- Talk about them to someone you trust.
- Remember that, although reminders of trauma can feel overwhelming, they often lessen with time.

Sudden feelings of anxiety or panic

These are a common part of traumatic stress reactions and include sensations of your heart pounding and feeling light-headed or spacey (usually caused by rapid breathing). If this happens, remember that:

- These reactions are not dangerous. If you had them while exercising, they probably would not worry you.
- It is the fact that you are probably having frightening but inaccurate thoughts (e.g., I'm going to die, I'm having a heart attack, I will lose control) that makes them especially upsetting.
- Slowing down your breathing may help. Think of the acronym “S.E.L.F.” (Slow; Even; Long; Full) breaths.
- The sensations will pass soon and you can go about your business after they decrease.

Each time you think in these positive ways about your stressful/anxious reactions, you will be working toward making them happen less frequently. Practice will make it easier to cope.

Feeling like the trauma is happening again (flashbacks)

- Keep your eyes open. Look around you and notice where you are.
- Talk to yourself. Remind yourself where you are, what day, month and year it is, and that you are safe. The trauma happened in the past, and you are in the present.
- Get up and move around. Have a drink of water and wash your hands.
- Call someone you trust and tell them what is happening.
- Remind yourself that this is a common traumatic stress reaction.
- Talk to a counsellor or doctor about the flashback(s).

Trauma-related dreams and nightmares

- If you awaken from a nightmare in a panic, remind yourself that you are reacting to a dream and that's why you are anxious/distressed, not because there is real danger now.
- Consider getting up out of bed, regrouping, and orienting yourself.
- Engage in a pleasant, calming activity (e.g., listen to soothing music).
• Talk to someone if possible.
• Talk to a doctor about your nightmares; certain medications can be helpful.

**Difficulty falling or staying asleep**

• Keep to a regular bedtime schedule.
• Avoid strenuous exercise for the few hours just before going to bed.
• Avoid using your sleeping area for anything other than sleeping or sexual intimacies.
• Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and caffeine. These harm your ability to sleep.
• Do not lie in bed thinking or worrying. Get up and enjoy something soothing or pleasant; read a calming book, drink a glass of warm milk, or do a quiet hobby.

**Irritability, anger, and rage**

• Take a time out to cool off or think things over. Walk away from the situation.
• Get in the habit of exercising daily. Exercise reduces body tension and helps get the anger out in a positive and productive way.
• Remember that staying angry doesn't work. It actually increases your stress and can cause health problems.
• Talk to a counsellor or doctor about your anger. Take classes in anger management.
• If you blow up at family members or friends, find time as soon as you can to talk to them about it. Let them know how you feel and what you are doing to cope with your reactions.

**Difficulty concentrating**

• Slow down. Give yourself time to focus on what it is you need to learn or do.
• Write things down. Making to do lists may be helpful.
• Break tasks down into small do-able chunks.
• Plan a realistic number of events or tasks for each day.
• You may be depressed; many people who are depressed have trouble concentrating. Again, this is something you can discuss with a counsellor, doctor, or someone close to you.

**Having difficulty feeling or expressing positive emotions**

• Remember that this is a common reaction to trauma, that you are not doing this on purpose, and that you should not feel guilty for something you do not want to happen and cannot control.
• Make sure to regularly participate in activities that you enjoy or used to enjoy. Sometimes, these activities can rekindle feelings of pleasure. Be patient in your expectations – even if you don’t enjoy these activities the way you used to at first, persevere with them because given time, you will rediscover the pleasure you used to experience.
• Take steps to communicate your caring to loved ones in little ways: write a card, leave a small gift, or phone someone and say hello.
A Final Word

Experiment with these ways of coping to find which ones are helpful to you. Practice them; like other skills, they work better with practice. Talk to a counsellor or doctor about them. Reach out to people that can help, support services, your family, and your community. You’re not alone.

Assistance in this area and many others can be obtained from the RMIT Student Counselling Service. The RMIT Counselling Service offers free and confidential counselling to all RMIT students. Counsellors may help you to explore your concerns, both personal and academic.

The RMIT Counselling Service can be contacted at 9925-4365 between 9am and 5pm.