

Supporting people who have  
experienced traumatic events

**NCMH**  
National Centre for Mental Health  
Canolfan Iechyd Meddwl Genedlaethol



Straen  
Trawmatig  
Cymru

Traumatic  
Stress  
Wales

# Supporting people who have experienced traumatic events



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# Who is this guide for?

**This guide has been written for anyone supporting people who experienced traumatic events, and is designed to accompany training offered by the All Wales Traumatic Stress Quality Improvement Initiative.**

Groups of people who are particularly likely to have experienced traumatic events include survivors of physical or sexual violence, refugees and asylum seekers, and other people seeking sanctuary such as trafficked women.

This guide has been designed to help you feel more confident about helping people who have been affected by traumatic events. It is not designed as an alternative to professional support.

The guide starts with a brief summary of PTSD and CPTSD, and tips for working in a trauma-informed way. It has a section for each of the main problems that people affected by traumatic events may experience. You do not have to read each section in order – just use each one when you would like to help the person manage that particular problem.

Finally, the guide has a toolkit, in the form of worksheets. These show techniques that can be useful for the different problems described. The person who has been affected by traumatic events can use the worksheets on their own or together with you.

**There is no right or wrong way to use these resources.**

# What are traumatic events?

Types of traumatic experiences include:

- Road traffic accidents
- Natural disasters such as fires or earthquakes
- Physical or sexual assault
- Childhood abuse
- Experiencing or witnessing violence, sexual violence, domestic violence, or abuse
- Forced marriage, honour-based abuse and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)
- Being forced to become a sex worker
- Torture, kidnapping or slavery
- Being a prisoner of war
- Being exposed to traumatic events through your work

People who have experienced these traumatic events may not have any psychological difficulties. However, many people experience difficulties such as anxiety and low mood following traumatic events.

Some people also develop symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Complex PTSD (CPTSD). People who have experienced prolonged or repeated traumatic events are particularly likely to develop CPTSD.



# What are PTSD and Complex PTSD?

- Reliving aspects of what has happened in the present, in the form of nightmares, flashbacks or intrusive memories
- Avoidance of reminders of the traumatic experience
- Experiencing a sense of ongoing threat and feeling 'super-alert' and jumpy

As well as these PTSD symptoms, some people also have additional symptoms, which, together, are called Complex PTSD and include:

- Negative beliefs or feelings about yourself, such as feeling guilty or worthless.
- Difficulties controlling your emotions
- Difficulties sustaining relationships and feeling close to others

The majority of people who have experienced traumatic events do not go on to develop PTSD or CPTSD. However, many people do.

You are not expected to diagnose people with PTSD or CPTSD, but it is likely to be helpful to you and the people you are working with to recognise and understand the common symptoms and to be aware of approaches that can help.

This guide is designed to be helpful for supporting all people who have experienced traumatic events, and not just people with PTSD or CPTSD.

## Sara's story

Sara is a refugee from Syria, who made the journey to Lebanon after her husband and son had been abducted and murdered by ISIS for supporting the Assad Regime.

Sara had to wait at a camp in Lebanon for several months, where she was sexually assaulted on multiple occasions.

She was eventually accepted onto the Vulnerable Person Resettlement Programme (VPRP) and arrived in the UK.

Sara experiences nightmares of her husband and son's abduction and of her sexual assaults nearly every night.

She has frequent flashbacks and intrusive memories of these traumatic events.

She is constantly jumpy and hyper-alert, and feels as though she is not safe anywhere.

She experiences reminders of her traumatic experiences all around her and only feels safe in her flat.

Sara often experiences intense headaches, particularly at night time and when she has had a flashback.

Sara feels very guilty for surviving, and says that she does not deserve to be alive.

She now finds it very difficult to calm herself down again after she has become panicky or upset and feels very scared around other people, particularly men.

## Anne's story

As a child, Anne experienced sexual abuse by an uncle.

In adulthood she survived a sexual assault from an ex-partner. She has recently escaped a physically and emotionally abusive relationship.

Anne has frequent nightmares and flashbacks of the sexual abuse, sexual assault and domestic violence.

Night-time is difficult for her as the sexual abuse took place in bed, and she drinks a bottle of wine in the evening to cope.

Anne has daily flashbacks in which she has the sense that she is back at the time of the traumatic events, and loses touch with her surroundings.

She often feels numb and detached from her body.

Anne feels very low and worthless, and feels different from other people because of her experiences.

She feels unable to trust anyone and isolates herself where possible.

## Mehdi's story

Mehdi is an asylum seeker from Iran, where he was detained by the police and accused of opposing the Government.

He spent over a year in prison, and during this time he was repeatedly tortured and sexually assaulted.

He was eventually released and made his way into Europe and then to the UK. His claim for asylum was refused but he has appealed and is waiting for a decision. He is currently living in temporary accommodation with other asylum seekers.

Mehdi experiences nightmares and intrusive memories of his imprisonment, torture and

sexual assault. He is very jumpy and alert to danger and finds it impossible to relax.

Mehdi tries to avoid thinking about his traumatic experiences and avoids being around other people. He experiences pain all over his body but doctors have not found a medical explanation for this.

Mehdi is also very depressed and often has thoughts of suicide. He feels guilty for surviving and thinks that he is now being punished for escaping. He is very fearful about the decision on his asylum claim, and fears that he may have to return to Iran.

# Tips for working with people who have experienced traumatic events

Traumatic events usually occur within the context of human relationships. People who have experienced trauma have often been hurt or betrayed by people who they trusted, or who were supposed to protect them.

Traumatic events can be associated with:

- Threat and danger
- Breach of trust
- Coercion
- Lack of control
- Powerlessness

When supporting people who have experienced these types of traumatic events, it can be really important for you and your service to work in a trauma-informed way.

As far as possible, offer:

- Transparency and trustworthiness
- Choice
- Collaboration
- Empowerment
- Safety

**How might you be affected when supporting someone who has experienced traumatic events?**

Although it can be very rewarding, it can also be very stressful at times. If you have personally experienced traumatic events then this can make it even harder.



## **How can you look after yourself?**

Try to maintain a good work-life balance, with some interests that do not involve your work or volunteering.

Tool 6 (balanced activities) might help you to plan some activities that give you a sense of relaxation and achievement as well as some social activities.

It can be helpful to talk to your colleagues and to use peer support within your organisation, as well having regular supervision and training.

## **Should you talk about traumatic events?**

People may want to talk about what has happened to them. If so, it is fine to talk to them about this, although do not ask for lots of details unless they want to tell you.

If people do not want to describe what happened, that is also fine. You can still talk to them about how it has left them feeling.

Listening to people can be a really important first step and it is important not to pressure people to talk about things they are not ready to talk about.

# Ideas for how to talk to people who have experienced traumatic events

- Give them time to talk at their own pace. They may or may not want to talk about their traumatic experience - either is fine. You can talk to them about how they are feeling without going into details about what happened
- Reassure them that it is normal to feel lots of different emotions after traumatic events
- People can feel guilty or ashamed about their reactions, so it is important not to minimise what happened to them by saying 'it could have been worse'
- Remember that they may often feel jumpy or on edge, as a result of being hurt by other people
- Try to avoid touching them without permission, or startling or surprising them



# Helping people who feel scared and jumpy

When we feel stressed emotionally, our bodies release adrenaline. This is the body's way of preparing to respond to a threat and is called the fight, flight or freeze response.

## **Fight, flight or freeze response:**

- Increased heart rate
- Shallow breathing to take in more oxygen
- Tense muscles
- Racing thoughts to help instant reactions

This system works well and helps us to survive. However, if people have experienced extreme or long-lasting trauma, then this system stays turned on, even when the danger has passed.

The threat system takes a 'better be safe than sorry' approach, like a smoke alarm that is too sensitive and keeps going off when the toast is burnt.

If someone has been in danger in the past, their brain remembers and is more sensitive to this information.

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# Relaxed breathing

When people are frightened, they often stop breathing normally. This increases feelings of fear and panic, and keeps the fight or flight response turned on even though there is no danger.

If the person relaxes their breathing, this tells their brain that the danger has passed, and helps to switch off the flight or fight response.

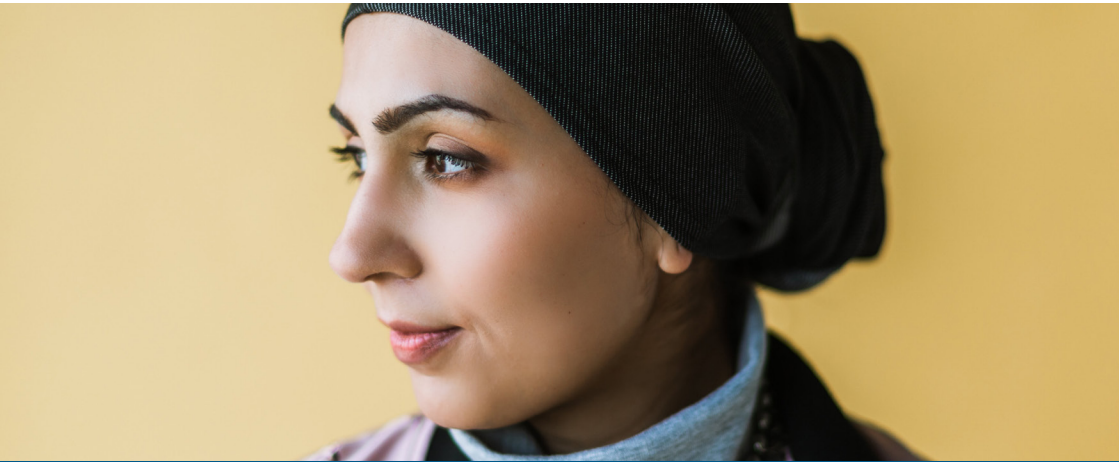
## Steps for relaxed breathing

1. Breathe in slowly and steadily for a count of three through their nose
2. Breathe out slowly and steadily for a count of six through their mouth
3. Try to push the air out through their stomach, not their chest
4. If their attention wanders off from their breathing then they can gently bring it back to their breath
5. Repeat for a few minutes until they notice that they are feeling calmer

## Tip

To begin with, it might be helpful for the person to practise this skill when they are quite calm. This makes it easier for them to use it when they are feeling panicky.

It might also be helpful for you to practise this skill with them. This might make them feel less self-conscious, and make it easier for them to learn the skill.



## Sara's story

Sara often felt anxious and jumpy, especially when she was in crowds of people or in unfamiliar places.

Her heart pounded and her breathing became very rapid, and this made her feel frightened that she would pass out.

Sara practised her relaxed breathing at home so that she became familiar with the technique.

She then started using it whenever she noticed that she was becoming anxious.

Over time, she learnt that she could reduce her anxiety, and that she had some control over her breathing.

Sara learnt that her headaches became worse when she was very anxious, and that by relaxing her body, her headaches became less intense.

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# Steps for relaxing the body

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



## Anne's story

When she was sexually abused as a child, Anne learnt to mentally detach herself from her body. This had become an automatic way of coping when she was feeling frightened and stressed.

Anne practised her Relaxed Body technique at home when she was feeling calm.

She started using it when she noticed that she was feeling stressed and anxious, and gradually found that she could calm herself down and stay more connected with her body.

## Tip

As with the **Relaxed breathing** skill, it can be helpful for the person to practise this at a time when they are relatively calm, before putting it into action if they are feeling panicky.

It might be reassuring if you go through the steps at the same time as them so they do not feel self-conscious. It can also make the skill easier to learn if you demonstrate the steps yourself.

# Helping people with flashbacks and strong memories of a traumatic event

Flashbacks occur because people have not been able to process the trauma memory properly.

The memory becomes 'stuck' in the wrong part of the brain rather than being stored with their other memories.

Flashbacks are vivid experiences in which people relive some aspects of the traumatic event, or feel as though the trauma is happening again, right now.

## **Flashbacks can be:**

- Like watching a video or an image of what has happened
- Re-experiencing sounds, smells or tastes connected to the trauma
- Feeling physical sensations such as pain
- Experiencing emotions that they felt during the trauma.

People who have flashbacks or strong memories often find them very frightening. They sometimes worry that they are going mad.

Understandably, people often try to suppress their traumatic memories. However, this often makes the memories 'pop up' more frequently and can feel even more upsetting.

It is a bit like trying to push a beach ball under the water. It just keeps popping back up.



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## Ways to help people when they get flashbacks and strong memories

- Reassure people that these are normal. They are the brain's way of trying to deal with the trauma memory
- Remind them that, just like the beach ball floating on the water, if they try to push the memories away they will keep popping up again
- Encourage people to just to notice the memories
- You can also talk about the memories being like trains coming into a station. The trains are noisy and frightening, but as long as you stay on the platform the trains won't hurt you. They will stay in the station for a while and then leave again



# Managing triggers for memories and flashbacks

Most of the time, flashbacks and memories do not come out of the blue. Instead, they are triggered by particular reminders. These reminders tend to be sensory, that is, they might be things that you smell, see, touch, hear or taste. The reminders might also be feelings or physical sensations.

These reminders are not in themselves harmful. However, they are really similar to things that the person experienced during the trauma. This makes people feel very scared and can often trigger the memory in the form of a flashback.

The problem is that people avoid these reminders. This means that they do not learn that the reminders are not harmful and that they are safe now. So they feel just as frightened as they did at the time of the traumatic event.

One way to help the person is to encourage them to get to know what their triggers are, and then find things that help to remind them of where they are, and that they are safer now. This is called Grounding.

## Steps for grounding

Talk to the person about what their triggers are. The person may find it helpful to use Tool 3 in order to record information about different triggers.

Then help the person to think of things that help them feel safer and remind them of where they are now.

It can be helpful to use all five senses to focus attention in the present moment. See Tool 4.

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# Steps for grounding

Focus on things  
that I can see



Such as people, objects in the room  
or colours around you

Focus on 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 com-  
forting objects ready to touch, such  
as stress balls or pebbles.

Focus on things  
that I can hear



Focus on the noises around you in  
the present moment. You can also  
listen to some music that reminds  
you of where you are and that you  
are safer now.

Focus on 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 like, such as coffee or  
perfume.

Focus on things  
that I can taste

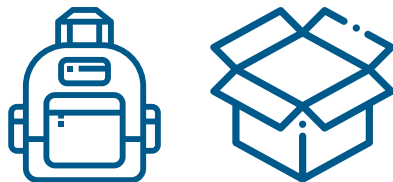


Things with strong flavours are  
good, such as mints.

Focus on  
sensations in my  
body that are  
different



You can move around, focus on your  
breathing or leave the room.



Some people like to make a **Grounding box or bag**, in which they collect these comforting sensory objects.

Some people like to use a 'safe phrase' such as:

**“I am in [my house], it is [the year],  
and I am safe.”**

The person might find this easier if they imagine saying this to a friend eg “You are in [your house], in [the year] and you are safe”.

They could practise saying this phrase to you before using it for themselves.

It is helpful to talk about triggers and to practice grounding when the person is feeling relatively safe and calm. This makes it easier for them to use the strategies when they experience a trigger.

It is also helpful to have these grounding strategies written down so that they can remind themselves if they need to.

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# How to help someone who is having a flashback

Although it is alarming, try to stay calm if someone is having a flashback

- 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
- 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

## Sara's grounding strategies:

Looking around her to see what is in the room now.

If she is out of the house, looking at things that tell her that she is in Cardiff, such as the road signs and shop fronts.

Looking at a photograph of her in front of the Wales Millennium Centre with a friend, to remind herself that she is in Wales and that she is not alone.

Looking at her calendar to remind her of the year.



Listening to sounds around her in the room.

Listening to the radio or music on her phone to remind her of the year.



Smelling tiger balm or tasting strong mints that she keeps in her pocket.



# Helping people with sleep problems and nightmares

Why do people who have experienced traumatic events have problems sleeping?

It can be very difficult to go to sleep when your threat system is turned on and you are geared up for fight or flight.

When people are lying in bed with no distractions, it is difficult to stop their mind going over problems.

If they have nightmares, they may be scared of going to sleep, and once they have a nightmare it is very difficult to go back to sleep again.

For some people, the bedroom or night-time is associated with traumatic events and this can make it even more difficult to go to sleep.




## Sara's story

Sara had distressing nightmares of the sexual abuse most nights.

She usually woke up in the middle of these, and would feel terrified and confused about where she was, and felt as though she was seven years old again.

She would find it very difficult to get back to sleep again, and became terrified of going to bed.

# Some helpful habits to improve sleep

- Avoid caffeine and smoking near bedtime
- Try not to nap in the day time
- Do some exercise during the day, although not too near bed time
- Establish a bedtime routine. Write down your worries on a bit of paper by your bed 
- Have a relaxing place to sleep – quiet, dark and cool 
- No screens a few hours before bedtime and not in bed 
- Use your relaxed breathing and relaxed body techniques. (Tools 1 and 2)
- If you are not asleep within 30 minutes, get up and do something else for a while before going back to bed and trying again

## What can people do if they wake from a nightmare?

- It may be helpful to turn your light on
- Look around the room to remind yourself of where you are
- Use your grounding techniques (Tool 4)
- Remind yourself that the fear is coming from the past, not now
- Try using your Relaxed breathing or Relaxed body tools (Tools 1 and 2)
- If you find it hard to get back to sleep, it might be helpful to listen to some relaxing music

## Sara's story

Sara made her bedroom as comfortable as possible.

She put a photograph of herself at the beach by her bed, to remind herself that she was no longer a child and that she was safe. She put some lavender by her bed, and had a soft blanket over her duvet.

She listened to relaxing music before she went to bed, and practised her relaxed breathing and body techniques.

When she woke up from a nightmare, she would use her grounding techniques (Tool 4), focusing on what she could **see** (her blue duvet cover, the photograph, picture on the wall), **hear** (her clock, the radio), **touch** (her blanket), **smell** (lavender), **and do** (walk around, breathe deeply, relax her muscles).

She would remind herself of where she was by saying 'I am in Cardiff, it is June, I survived and I am safe.'





## Helping people who are feeling numb or dissociative

Dissociation describes the experience of 'shutting off' and losing awareness of what is happening around you. Day dreaming and going on 'auto pilot' are common types of dissociation. People with complex traumatic stress symptoms can often experience this.

Symptoms of dissociation include:

- Feeling numb or spaced out
- Feeling cut off from your body
- The world around you seems unreal or dreamlike
- The world might seem distant, as though behind a glass screen or in a dream.

## Why do people who have experienced trauma dissociate?

At the time of the trauma the brain protects us by shutting off and distancing us from what was happening. This often happens if the traumatic event occurred in childhood or over a long period of time.

This can be a helpful survival strategy. However, for some people, this can become an automatic response to feeling stressed, which continues after the trauma has passed.

Dissociation makes it difficult to deal with the trauma. It can also mean that people feel shut off from more positive feelings such as pleasure and it makes it harder to be close to people. It can make people more likely to experience physical sensations and pain. It can also make it harder to spot danger and to protect ourselves.

## Mehdi's story

Mehdi started feeling numb and detached from his body when he was being tortured in prison. Sometimes he had the sense that he was looking down at himself.

Sometimes he would lose a sense of time, and would have no memory for what had just happened. These sensations helped him to survive his experience and shut off the pain.

However, Mehdi continued to dissociate afterwards, especially if he was feeling tired or stressed, or if he was reminded of the traumatic experience.

Mehdi felt numb and detached a lot of the time, and this made it hard for him to feel happy or close to other people.



# What can you do to help someone who is dissociating?

- Reassure the person that dissociation is a common response to traumatic events
- It can be helpful to identify triggers for dissociation. These triggers are often reminders of the traumatic experience, and are similar to the triggers for flashbacks
- The person might find it helpful to refer to the 'My Triggers' tool (Tool 3) to try to work out when they tend to dissociate
- It might also be useful for the person to notice their 'early warning signs' of dissociation so that they can use their grounding strategies quickly
- Strategies such as Relaxed breathing (Tool 1), Relaxed body (Tool 2) and Grounding (Tool 4) can all be helpful to use if someone is feeling numb and spaced out, and have started to dissociate
- It can often be helpful to practise these strategies when feeling calm and relaxed, so that people are confident about using them when they are feeling spaced out.
- You can remind yourself of helpful things to say to people that are dissociating by using Tool 5 - Helping someone who is having a flashback

## Anne's story

When she was sexually abused as a child, Anne learnt to mentally detach herself from her body. This had become an automatic way of coping when she was feeling frightened and stressed.

Anne practiced her Relaxed Body technique at home when she was feeling calm.

She started using it when she noticed that she was feeling stressed and anxious, and gradually found that she could calm herself down and stay more connected with her body.

## Mehdi's story

Mehdi learnt to recognise when he was starting to dissociate. He also learnt that he started feeling numb if he was feeling very stressed or anxious, especially if he was around other people.

Mehdi practised his grounding strategies and collected a bag of sensory grounding objects.

He learnt that focusing on touch (squeezing a stress ball) and smell (tiger balm) really helped him to come back to the present time.

He practised reminding himself of where he was ('I am in Wrexham, it is [the year], I am safe') and focusing on everything that he could see that helped remind him of this.

Mehdi also found that using the Relaxed Breathing and Relaxed Body tools helped to bring him back to his body again.

Over time, Mehdi became less dissociative, and started to feel more connected to other people.

# Helping people who feel easily upset and angry

Anger and other strong emotions are related to the same fight or flight system that causes jumpiness and panic. The threat system takes a 'better be safe than sorry' approach.

Trauma is often caused by being hurt by other people, and not being protected by people who should have looked after them. This injustice can understandably make people feel very angry and upset.

People who have experienced traumatic events can become very sensitive to signs that other people are threatening them or treating them badly.

Often, people with childhood trauma have never had the experience of being comforted when they were upset or scared. This may mean that they find it very difficult to soothe and comfort themselves when they are adults.

They might over-react or misinterpret situations.

People may have learnt to ignore or numb their feelings. This can mean that they do not spot early warning signs and may not find ways to calm their overwhelming feelings.

## Mehdi's story

Mehdi felt very angry and ashamed about the torture and sexual assault that he had experienced.

He often dwelled on the injustice of it, and the fact that the perpetrators had not been brought to justice.

He also felt upset towards himself for not having been able to stop it, and very angry and upset towards the British authorities for the asylum process.

These feelings became worse if he was feeling frightened or stressed, as his fight or flight system became very active.

Sometimes he would get into confrontations with people that he felt were treating him badly.

This is because this feeling reminded him of how he felt during the traumatic experience, and he didn't want other people to get away with treating him badly.

## Ways of managing feelings of 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
- It can sometimes be helpful to imagine 'surfing' your emotions, 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) strategies 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

## Mehdi's story

Mehdi learnt that he became very angry and upset when he felt that he was not being listened to, or that people were thinking badly about him.

He learnt that his first signs of anger were a racing heart and feeling hot.

Mehdi planned how he would respond in these situations, and what he would do if he noticed he was becoming very upset.

He practised his Relaxed Breathing and Relaxed Body techniques in advance so that he could use these when he started to become angry.

Mehdi used his time-out strategy to give him time to calm down. He also talked to a friend that he trusted afterwards.

# Helping people who have difficulties trusting and getting close to people

People who have experienced traumatic events often find it difficult to trust other people and to develop and maintain relationships.

Their trauma is often related to being hurt by other people, especially people close to them that they should have been able to trust.

Often they have also been hurt or let down by people in power and by authorities. People seeking sanctuary may have been let down both within their country of origin, and also during their flight and on arrival in the UK.

Some people, particularly women, have also experienced gender-based violence which makes it difficult to trust men.

People seeking sanctuary in the UK have also lost their social support networks and often been the victims of hostility and racism.

Understandably, this can lead people to feel fearful in social situations, particularly crowds of people they do not know.

People can become worried about what other people are thinking and feel scared that they might be in danger. Sometimes this can lead people to see everyday situations as dangerous.

People who are new to the UK might find society very unfamiliar and difficult to understand, and may not understand how authorities and organisations such as the police work.

Therefore people may feel unsafe in their daily life and also believe that they will not be helped by the police or other agencies.

Often people who have experienced traumatic events feel numb and detached, and this can also make it difficult to feel close to other people.



# Anne's story

Anne found it very difficult to trust anyone, especially men.

She felt very frightened that people would hurt her or let her down, and because of this, she couldn't feel close to people and felt very anxious in social situations.

Anne was very fearful that she would be assaulted again.

As a child and an adult, she had not been protected from serious harm, therefore she believed that she could not trust anyone apart from herself.

## What can you do to help?

- Just listening to people and providing practical and social support is a really important first step
- You can explain that these fears are very normal for people who have experienced traumatic events
- You can help provide information about local community support organisations and the police or you can help people find out information for themselves
- You can help people plan for tricky situations such as going for medical, legal or benefits appointments. Gradually going into difficult situations will help build confidence, reduce anxiety and help people learn that situations are safer than they appear
- You can encourage people to use their Relaxed breathing (Tool 1), Relaxed body (Tool 2) or Grounding (Tool 3) strategies. You could help them practise these tools before going into tricky situations
- You can help people to access English as a second or foreign language (ESOL) courses, if language is a barrier for them

# Sara's story

Sara found out that if she was feeling unsafe or scared, she could call the police on 101 (for advice) or 999 (for emergencies).

She learnt that the police would give her advice on what to do and they would try to help her.

Sara also found out about other organisations that she could go to for advice and support.

Sara gradually started going to new places such as the leisure centre and the library.

She started noticing what people were doing when they were in these places, and found out that people did not seem likely to harm her.



# Helping people who are feeling depressed

People with who have experienced traumatic events have often experienced a huge amount of loss. These losses can include the death of, or separation from, loved ones. People have often lost their homes, support networks, occupation and identity.

They are often denied the opportunity or resources to participate in occupations and everyday activities that they need for their wellbeing and belonging.

People often feel very bad about themselves because of the things that they have experienced and seen, even when these things were not their fault or under their control.

They might feel guilty and ashamed for what they experienced or did during the traumatic event, or for surviving and managing to get to a place of safety when other people did not.

Sometimes their sense of themselves as a good person has been shattered.

People might feel as though they have been permanently changed by their experiences, and that they have lost their sense of themselves. These experiences can also make people feel that other people are judging them and looking down on them.

People often dwell on past events to try to figure out why they happened or how they could have been prevented. This type of thinking often makes them feel even worse about themselves.

## Mehdi's story

Mehdi felt very guilty as he managed to escape the prison where he was detained, by getting his friends to bribe one of the guards.

Some of the people that he was detained with died after being tortured and lots of them continued to be detained.

Mehdi felt that he did not deserve to live, and that he would now be punished for surviving.

Mehdi was very low and sometimes had suicidal thoughts. He avoided people as he felt so bad about himself and thought that other people would judge him if they knew about his experiences.

## What can you do to help?

- Just listening to people without judging them can be really important – see 'Tips for working with people who have experienced traumatic events' - page 8
- Reassure them that these sorts of feelings are common after traumatic events
- Encourage them to focus on the present and the future and to work towards some small goals
- Support them to participate in activities that will help them come together with other people
- People often find it beneficial to have a combination of relaxing activities, social activities and achievement-focused activities – you could help them think of some examples, Tool 6: Balanced activity planner
- Encourage people to think about their strengths and resources. These are qualities that have enabled them to survive their experiences and that remain a part of them

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**Examples of  
relaxing activities**

Going for a walk by  
the river

Watching a film

Reading a book

**Examples of  
social activities**

Meeting up with a  
friend for a coffee

Going to a place of  
worship

Volunteering

**Examples of  
achievement  
focused activities**

Registering with a  
dentist

Tidying your bedroom

Enrolling on an ESOL  
course (English for  
Speakers of Other  
Languages)

- If you notice that someone is blaming themselves for things that weren't under their control, it can be helpful to ask them what they would say to a friend, or to you, in the same situation. This is because it is often easier for people to be compassionate and rational when they think about it from someone else's point of view
- Sometimes it can be helpful for people to use their experiences to help other people, in the form of volunteering or campaigning

Mehdi thought about his strengths and resources. He remembered that he was intelligent, courageous and kind.

He also thought about some of the things that he had previously enjoyed doing.

He thought about why these things had been important to him, and ways to start doing these things again.

**Social activity** – volunteering at his local mosque.

**Relaxing activity** – borrowing a bike and going for a ride by the river.

**Achievement focused activity** – enrolling on an ESOL course at his college.

# Barriers to accessing health and welfare support

There are effective treatments available for people who have experienced traumatic events, including people who have symptoms of PTSD and CPTSD.

However, many people find it difficult to access health and welfare services, particularly refugees and asylum seekers and other vulnerable groups. Some reasons for this are:

- Language and communication barriers, including lack of access to appropriately trained interpreters of both genders
- Using culturally specific words for mental and emotional distress that may not be understood by health care providers
- Having physical symptoms and pain that does not seem to have a medical explanation
- Lack of trust in government organisations and health care providers due to their traumatic experiences
- Difficult and unstable living arrangements, including dispersal and rehousing to different parts of the country at short notice
- Feeling embarrassed and ashamed about having a mental health problem
- A lack of understanding by health care and other professionals about the types of problems that people who have experienced traumatic events have, and how to help
- A lack of appropriate services and long waits to access them

## Sara's story

Sara was scared of going to her GP to tell them about her flashbacks and nightmares.

She could speak some English, but was worried that she wouldn't be able to describe her experiences accurately, and that the GP wouldn't understand her.

Sara's flashbacks were triggered by men laughing and by being touched when she wasn't

expecting it, and she was very scared that the doctor would be a man and that she would have a flashback.

Sara didn't feel confident that there were any treatments that could help her with her flashbacks and nightmares and did not feel that there was any point in going to see the doctor.

## Ways to help people access support

- Acknowledging their traumatic experiences  
(Tips for talking to people about trauma - page 8)
- Finding out more about their understanding of mental distress and what words that they use to describe their distress. It can also be useful to ask them how they feel about seeking help and to talk about any feelings of embarrassment or shame about this
- Supporting the person to develop grounding skills, using these resources. This may help them to gain a sense of control over their distressing symptoms and feel more hopeful
- Providing the person with accessible information about what to expect during their appointment
- Visiting the clinic or surgery with them in advance, and introducing them to the receptionist or clinician
- Supporting the person to request the gender of the health provider, if they wish

## Sara's story

Sara's support worker spent time talking to her about her experiences and how these had affected her.

Her support worker also asked Sara about her worries about seeing her GP.

Together Sara and her support worker came up with a plan for how to manage her appointment.

They practised her grounding strategies, particularly her relaxed breathing, in case she had a flashback during the appointment.

Her support worker explained what would happen during the

appointment, and they then visited the surgery together and spoke to the receptionist so that Sara knew what to expect.

Her support worker helped her to request a female doctor, which was arranged.

During the appointment, Sara was very nervous but was able to explain that she was having flashbacks and nightmares.

Her doctor gave her an information leaflet that was written in her own language, and explained that this was a common response to traumatic events.





# 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.

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### 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.

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**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.

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**Things that I can taste**

Things with strong flavours are good, such as mints.

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**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.

<b>My relaxing/ comforting activities</b>	<b>My social activities</b>	<b>My achievement activities</b>
Eg watching a favourite film	Meeting up with a friend for coffee	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](https://ncmh.info/help) or contact us:

 [info@ncmh.info](mailto:info@ncmh.info)

 **02920 688401**

 [/walesmentalhealth](https://www.facebook.com/walesmentalhealth)

 [@ncmh\\_wales](https://twitter.com/ncmh_wales)

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