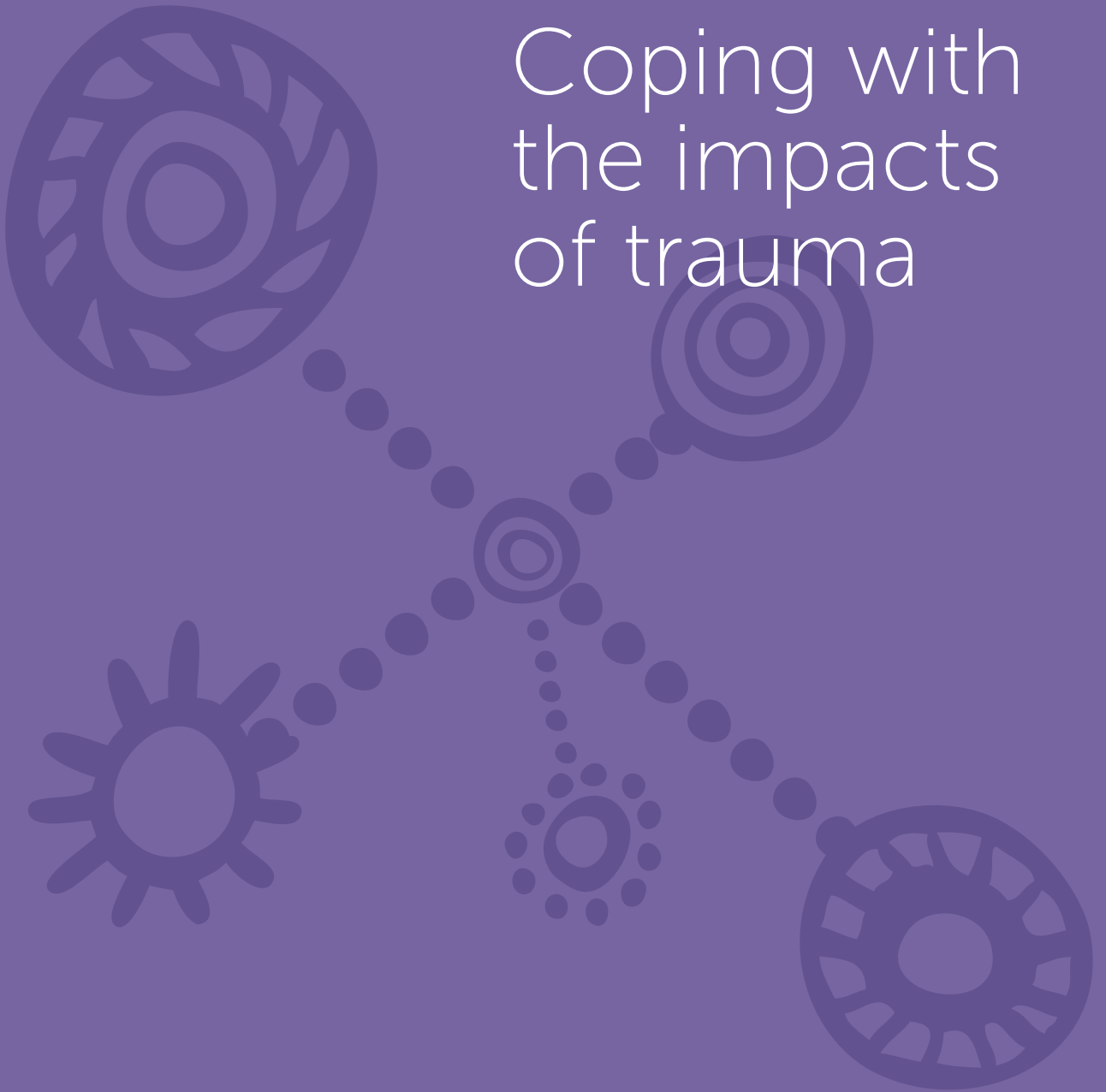


Coping with the impacts of trauma



HealingFoundation
Strong Spirit • Strong Culture • Strong People

People who have suffered trauma, or witnessed a terrible event often find things that happen in their daily lives can trigger distressing memories or reactions related to the original trauma. This can happen many years after the traumatic event occurred.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, traumatic experiences include being stolen as a child or having a child removed, suffering abuse or racism, or being dislocated from traditional lands, languages and cultural practices.

What is a trigger?

A trigger is something that sets off a memory or flashback that transports someone back to the event that caused their original trauma.

Triggers are very personal and can mean different things for different people. They can cause a trauma survivor to suddenly feel scared, angry or sick. Someone might start crying uncontrollably, feel their heart start to race, or experience breathlessness. Someone else may feel tired or sad and not know why they are reacting or feeling that way.

Many trauma survivors speak of feeling that their spirit has been broken or displaced by a traumatic event.

Trauma triggers are stored in the part of the brain that is responsible for keeping us safe and remembering danger. These memories can be conscious or unconscious. If our brain senses a similar threat it may set off an alarm signal, the trigger, in an attempt to keep us safe. This can happen at any time and trauma survivors often don't know what will trigger them.

Often the alarm is triggered by information coming in through one or more of our senses. Triggers are extremely personal and can happen at any time. Examples of potential triggers include:

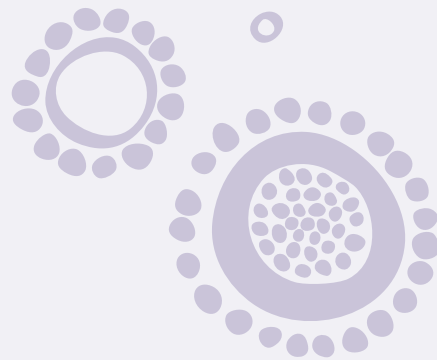
- the tone of someone's voice
- hearing a particular word
- a facial expression or a gesture
- a temperature
- images or discussions on television, radio, a computer or mobile device
- a smell or colour
- seeing documents about a traumatic event
- visiting certain places

Some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people experience trauma on country, for example when visiting the site of a former mission or dormitory. Hearing stories about these sites can also trigger trauma.

What happens when you are triggered?

Experiencing a trigger can feel like reliving a traumatic event. This can be frightening, and someone who has been triggered will often feel confused or overwhelmed.

It may be helpful to remember that trigger responses are your body reminding you of an old trauma and asking you to be careful about potential or perceived danger now, not a response to a current threat.



Healing and recovery

It is normal to feel powerless to stop the immediate physical or emotional response to a trigger, but a number of tools can help you calm yourself and get through the experience.

Everyone is different, so it's important to find a coping strategy that works for you.

Useful tips for how to help yourself when you feel triggered include:

- 1. Talk to someone.** Call a support person or friend to tell them how you are feeling and allow them to help you. It is not a sign of weakness to ask for help. Think about how you feel when you are in a position to help someone, it's the same for others.
- 2. Breathe.** Try and bring your attention to your breath: breathe in for 10 seconds and out for 10, and then reduce it to 9, 8, 7 and so on. This helps to not only distract you from the panic but also calms you down and helps you relax. Remind yourself that you are in another place now and take a slow, deep breath. Move your attention away from the person, situation, smell, sound or object that triggered you and bring your attention to your breath again.
- 3. Take a moment.** Physically leave the situation, reminding yourself you are not running away, you are just taking a break. You don't need to ignore your feelings, you just don't need to act on them right now. You are in control of your choices now.
- 4. Use a soothing response.** Try a response that helps to regulate your inner emotions. This could be a gentle tapping of your hand or leg, a gentle rocking back and forth, or perhaps placing your hand on your heart to reassure your body and spirit.
- 5. Play some music.** Some people find playing music very calming. Keep some soothing music on your phone or in your car to play if you experience a trigger.
- 6. Speak your truth.** You decide if you would like to participate in a conversation. Don't feel obligated to contribute to a conversation if the discussion is about trauma – you do not have to disclose your personal trauma. If speaking about your trauma makes you feel empowered you are entitled to speak your truth, but the decision is completely yours. You always have the power to leave if you feel uncomfortable. Feel free to say 'This conversation is making me feel uncomfortable, I would like to excuse myself', or simply change the subject.
- 7. Acknowledge your feelings.** Things will improve if you acknowledge and accept your emotions. Remember that you do not have to react in the moment. You are in control.
- 8. Repeat a statement or phrase.** Repeating a phrase in your head can distract you long enough to calm down and think more rationally. The phrase can be anything, for example 'I am safe', an affirmation of your strength, or a positive phrase you like.
- 9. Make an art piece.** This could be knitting, writing, painting or creating a song – they are all great ways to express yourself freely. Creating an art piece can help you process your experiences and get in touch with your strength and resilience in your own way. You don't have to share this art with anyone, unless you want to.
- 10. Connect to country.** Land is a major part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural identity and spirituality. Returning to country or visiting special local sites can be the most supportive way for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to regain strength and repair our spirits. Choose a place you connect with and sit for a bit. Some people find it helpful to put their feet in the water, or on the sand or grass.
- 11. Drink water.** The body releases chemicals when we are anxious. Drinking water can help to release toxins and reduce the stress you are feeling.
- 12. Exercise and eat well.** Go for a walk or a run. Trauma survivors sometimes need to step back to regain emotional stability and exercise of any kind is a perfect distraction. Make sure you eat lots of healthy vegetables and fruit to help your body and mind stay strong.

Recognise your strength and resilience

Thank your mind for looking out for you after a trigger response; regardless of how long it goes on for or how you reacted. Treat your response as a victory. Acknowledging how your body helped you to cope in the past is an important part of the healing process. Recognise the strength of your inner spirit and how your ancestors have guided you.

When you are ready, consider working with professionals to help you deal with your trauma and manage your responses. Through specialised therapy and other supportive healing services, many survivors of trauma learn a wider range of coping skills. This may help to manage triggers with further support provided for relief in reliving traumatic events from the past.

Trauma and abuse often takes control from us, but healing and recovery let us regain control. Healing builds our inner strength and supports us to live a strong and healthy life.