

Understanding Trauma Responses

A Pathfinder guide to survival responses, triggers and recovery.

Important

This resource is for information and self-support. It is not a substitute for therapy, medical advice, emergency care, or a personalised clinical assessment. If there is immediate danger to life, call 999 or go to your nearest A&E.; For urgent mental health support in England, call NHS 111 and select the mental health option.

Trauma responses are survival responses

Trauma responses are not weakness or failure. They are protective responses that the body and nervous system may use when something feels unsafe, overwhelming or inescapable.

Fight Anger, irritability, tension, urgency, feeling attacked.	Flight Restlessness, panic, overworking, avoiding stillness, needing to escape.
Freeze Numbness, stuckness, blank mind, difficulty speaking or deciding.	Collapse/shutdown Exhaustion, shame, hopelessness, disconnection, feeling small or absent.

Common trauma patterns

- Hypervigilance - always scanning for threat.
- Avoidance - staying away from reminders, people or places.
- Intrusions - memories, images, body sensations or nightmares.
- Emotional numbing - feeling distant from self or others.
- Shame - believing "something is wrong with me" rather than "something happened to me".
- Loss of trust - feeling unsafe with people, systems or the world.

Triggers and reminders

A trigger is something that activates a survival response. It may be obvious, such as a sound, smell or place, or subtle, such as tone of voice, facial expression, anniversary date or body sensation.

My known triggers: <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	My early warning signs: <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
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<p>What helps me stay present:</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<p>What makes things worse:</p> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
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The “then and now” distinction

Trauma often makes the body respond as though “then” is happening “now”. Recovery includes helping the nervous system learn that the current moment is different from the past event.

- Name the current year and location.
- Look for evidence that this is not the old danger.
- Notice your age now, not your age then.
- Use grounding before analysing the memory.
- Return to ordinary routines after grounding where possible.

When therapy may help

- The past keeps intruding into the present.
- You avoid important parts of life to stay safe.
- Anger, shame, fear or numbness are affecting relationships.
- Sleep, work or daily functioning are affected.
- You feel stuck in survival mode.
- You want to understand what happened and find a route forward.

Pathfinder reflection

I do not need to force myself to tell the whole story before I am ready. My first task is safety, stabilisation and finding the next step.