



Trauma, and the after-effects of trauma, which manifest as Post Traumatic Stress (PTS) and other, complex multifaceted trauma repercussions, can have a significant and detrimental impact upon sleep. It is certainly one of the more distressing symptoms reported by people who have survived trauma.

Difficulty getting to sleep, staying asleep, waking early, and waking frequently are by-products of nervous system hypervigilance following trauma.

Our Nervous System After Trauma

In the process of healing after a trauma, our brain will scan the environment for potential sources of threat. It is doing this all of the time of course, but after a trauma it becomes even more sensitive. Trauma triggers are things (sounds, smells, items, people) in our environment that our brain matches with the trauma, it categorises and matches these things to our trauma memory, and when it makes a match it ignites a panic response. This panic could come in the form of either fight, flight, or freeze. Experiencing frequent trauma triggers can affect our nervous system and lead to ongoing hypervigilance, and make it harder for us to physically relax. Our nervous system adjusts to this frequent ignition of panic and learns to remain constantly high because it suddenly makes sense to do so. The point to understand is that our brain is trying to help us, not hurt us.

Hypervigilance after trauma means that we become:

More alert to even small stimuli in our environments

Our brain senses expect and predict bad things to occur (sometimes subconsciously)

Heightened general arousal in our physical bodies

Feeling jumpy and “on edge”

More easily triggered

More likely to have a panic response

Our body learns from a traumatic experience that is helpful, and functional, to be on a constant state of alert. It does not know that the world is safe, in fact it has experienced the opposite, and therefore is trying to protect us from further harm through this hypervigilant state.

Trauma triggers (which come in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive thoughts, memories, feelings or images) are understood to be our brain’s attempts to heal after trauma. When such a scary and catastrophic thing has happened to us, our brain struggles to categorise this event into our other known, understood, memories of ourselves and the world around us. Before trauma, we may have our brain set up across a series of neural networks that are structured around some central “knowns” – *that we are ok, our world is safe, and we can protect ourselves*. That is the only way any of us can go about our daily business in life. After trauma, these things no longer become “knowns”, and we will question all of what came before, our brain will attempt to integrate the new trauma information – such as *I am unsafe, bad things happen, I can’t control things* – by showing us traumatic paraphernalia. It is as though the brain is saying, “where does this go?” “it doesn’t fit anywhere” “what does it mean?”.

How Trauma Affects Sleep

Sleep is a complex regulatory and basic biological function for all humans. It makes complete sense when we come to understand trauma and its impact upon our biology that sleep will also be affected. Our brain is responsible for putting us to sleep, and for remaining asleep throughout the night. If our brain and nervous system are responding throughout the day in hyper-aroused states, this will of course intrude into the night time.

The most common complaints following trauma are from the intrusion of nightmares waking us up in fright and panic, and the worry from ruminative negative, stressful thoughts swamping us at night. Fear and worry about sleep are often secondary problems that occur from us experiencing nightmares and distress at bed time.

Some Sleep Suggestions

It is important to follow the basic Sleep Hygiene guidelines which are contained in the Handout *Improve Your Sleep*. However, keep in mind that these suggestions do not take trauma into account, and therefore some suggestions might not be as directly applicable to your circumstances.

Tips and strategies particular to trauma include the following:

- Reduce Stress** Nightmares for all people occur more frequently with more overall day time stress. Try to counter-act your PTS by focusing on what stressors you can control. Stress can be effectively managed by becoming more organized, planning and scheduling, to keep things in order and reduce worry. Focusing on times for fun, relaxation, and socializing can also help counter-act PTS.
- Nightmares** Grounding techniques are helpful when you wake from a nightmare:
- Remind yourself you are in the present
 - Tell yourself you are safe and the trauma is not occurring now
 - Remind yourself a nightmare is a normal reaction to trauma
 - Re-script the nightmare, turning it into something funny and incongruent, or where you are in control of the trauma
 - Write down the nightmare
 - Try to find any meaning in the nightmare. What could be learned from it?
 - Breathe, and stretch and relax your muscles
 - “Wash it off” by having a shower, washing your face, having a drink
 - Express our distress – cry, yell, punch a pillow if you need to
- Signals of Safety** Our brain wants to learn eventually that the world is safe again. Any way that you can encourage your brain to see signals of safety will help counter-act the trauma triggers. Treat yourself with care, show loving kindness toward yourself, comfort and nurture yourself as you would a child. You could make a special totem to take to bed with you that reminds you that you are safe and powerful.