

Psychological Trauma

Understanding how trauma can affect the brain, body, and the meanings we make

Trauma can follow an event or series of events experienced as overwhelming, frightening, or threatening. People respond in different ways. Many reactions settle over time, while some remain distressing or disruptive.

What happens in trauma?

The brain and body move into survival mode. The alarm system becomes highly active, and memories may later feel vivid, sensory, emotionally intense, or difficult to organise into a complete story.

The brain creates associations

During trauma, the brain may link danger with cues that were present during the experience. Later, even a small reminder can activate the same alarm response before the brain has fully checked the present situation.

Trauma can affect beliefs and meaning

After trauma, people may form or strengthen beliefs intended to explain what happened or prevent it from happening again. Examples include: "I am unsafe", "I can't cope", "It was my fault", or "People can't be trusted". These beliefs are common and can keep alarm system active.

Common trauma responses

- Feeling on edge or "on guard"
- Jumpy or easily startled
- Intrusive memories
- Nightmares
- Avoidance
- Emotional numbness
- Shame or self-blame
- Irritability or anger
- Difficulty concentrating
- Body tension or pain
- Shutting down / dissociation

Why triggers feel so strong

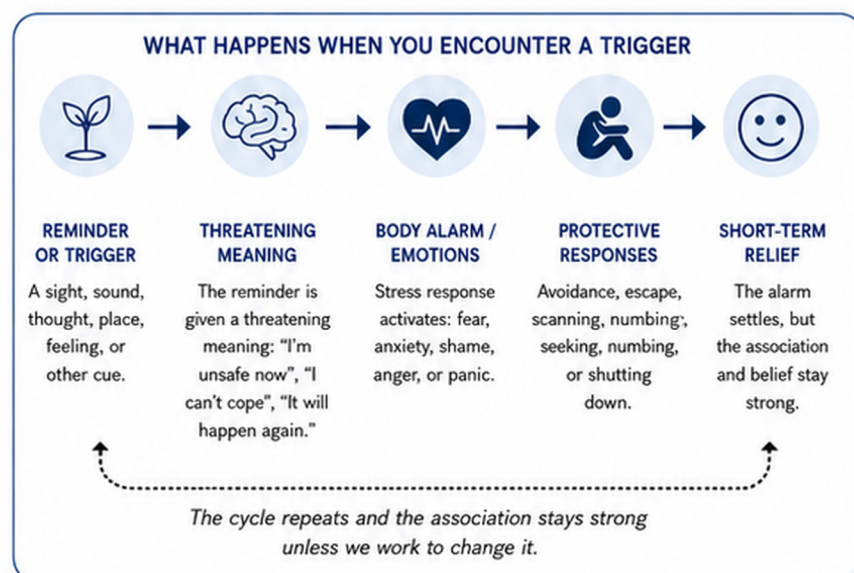
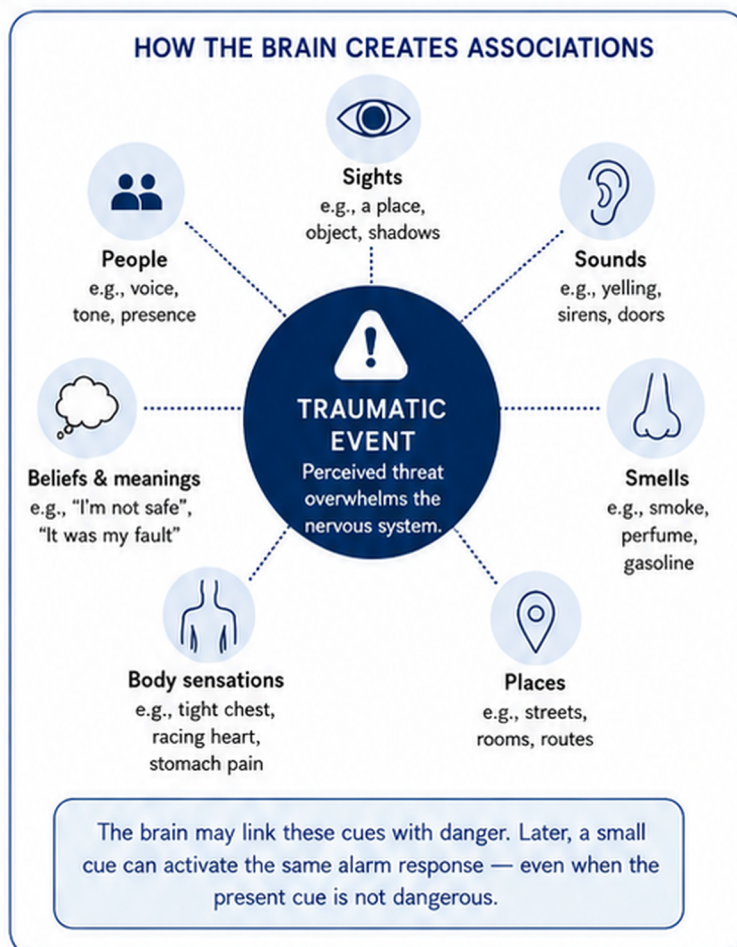
A trigger is a reminder connected with the original experience. It may activate the alarm before the brain has fully checked whether the present situation is different. Sometimes the cue signals real danger; at other times, it resembles past danger but is safe now.

What can help

- 📍 Orient to the present: notice where you are, the date, and what is different now
- 👂 Grounding (e.g., 5 senses, slow breathing if comfortable)
- 📖 Notice: "This is a reminder, not the event"
- 👥 Connect with safe, supportive people
- 🛡️ Strengthen present-day safety and choice
- 🚶 Move your body in gentle, supportive ways
- 🔄 Update trauma-related meanings
- 🌱 Gradual new learning around safe reminders
- 🧠 Consider evidence-based trauma-focused therapy when appropriate



Adapted from trauma-informed care resources and cognitive models of post-traumatic stress.



TAKEAWAY: Trauma responses are understandable. Your brain learned to protect you. Healing involves helping the brain and body learn the difference between past danger and present safety, while updating the meanings *trauma taught you*.

References

- Ehlers, A., & Clark, D. M. (2000). A cognitive model of posttraumatic stress disorder. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 38(4), 319-345.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2014). *Trauma-informed care in behavioral health services* (TIP 57; HHS Publication No. SMA 14-4816).
- Joshi, S. A., Aupperle, R. L., & Khalsa, S. S. (2023). Interoception in fear learning and posttraumatic stress disorder. *Focus*, 21(3), 268-277.