

Understanding Trauma & PTSD

For patients and the people who support them

If you've lived through something frightening or overwhelming, your mind and body may keep reacting as if it could happen again. That's not a weakness or a character flaw — it's a normal nervous system response to an abnormal event. This toolkit offers gentle tools for calming, understanding, and support.

Common Reactions After Trauma

Intrusive memories: Unwanted memories, nightmares, or flashbacks that make the past feel present.

Avoidance: Steering clear of people, places, or topics that bring the memory back.

Feeling on edge: Being easily startled, watchful for danger, or having trouble sleeping.

Mood & outlook changes: Numbness, guilt, irritability, or feeling distant from others.

It comes and goes: Symptoms can ease and return, especially near anniversaries or reminders — that's expected, not a setback.

How to use this toolkit

Pages 2–3 offer in-the-moment tools for you. Page 4 is for family and support people.

Page 5 is a blank safety & support plan. This toolkit supports — but doesn't replace — trauma-focused care.

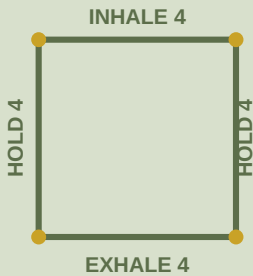
If this feels like a crisis, call or text 988 (Suicide & Crisis Lifeline) — available 24/7.

In-the-Moment Grounding Tools

For when a memory, flashback, or trigger feels overwhelming

1 Breathe — Box Breathing

Trace the box with your eyes or a finger. Each side is a slow count of 4.



Why it helps

Slow, even breathing signals your nervous system that the danger has passed, which can ease a racing heart, tight chest, or the urge to flee or freeze.

2 Ground — 5-4-3-2-1 Senses

Slowly notice, out loud or in your head:

- 5 things you can SEE
- 4 things you can TOUCH
- 3 things you can HEAR
- 2 things you can SMELL
- 1 thing you can TASTE

“Orient to now” script

“My name is _____. Today is _____.

I am in _____, and I am safe.

That was then. This is now.”

3 Safe Place Visualization

- Picture a real or imagined place where you feel calm and safe — notice what you'd see, hear, and feel there.
- Give it a one-word name (like “beach” or “porch”) so you can call it to mind quickly when you need it.

Understanding & Managing Triggers

Triggers activate old alarms — they don't mean danger is here now

1 What Is a Trigger?

- A trigger is a sound, sight, smell, place, date, or topic that reminds your body of a past threat.
- When it fires, your body reacts to the memory as if it's happening now — even though you're safe.

2 Common Trigger Categories

- Sensory reminders (sounds, smells, certain lighting), specific places, anniversaries or certain dates.
- News stories, conversations, or even certain tones of voice can also act as triggers.

3 A Simple Trigger Response Plan

- Notice: “Something just triggered me.” Name it, even just in your head.
- Ground yourself (try page 2), then reach out to someone or your plan on page 5 if you need to.

4 Sleep & Nighttime Tips

- Keep a consistent wind-down routine and a dim light nearby if darkness feels unsettling.
- If nightmares wake you, try a grounding tool before going back to sleep rather than replaying the dream.

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For Family & Support People

You can't fix it, but your steadiness matters more than you know

1 What Helps

- Offer patience and predictability — let your person set the pace for what and when they share.
- Simple, steady presence (“I’m here, take your time”) often helps more than advice or solutions.

2 What to Avoid

- Avoid pressing for details, minimizing (“just don’t think about it”), or comparing to others’ experiences.
- Give a heads-up before surprises, loud noises, or sudden touch — unexpected startles can retrigger.

3 Supporting a Child or Teen

- Keep routines predictable, and expect that big feelings or regression (clinginess, bedwetting) can be normal, not a setback.
- Follow their lead on talking about it, and reassure them often that they’re safe now.

4 Caring for Yourself Too

- Supporting someone through trauma is real work — your own rest, support, and boundaries matter.
- You’re allowed to seek your own support; caring for yourself helps you keep showing up for them.

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My Safety & Support Plan

Fill this out when you feel steady, so it's ready when you need it

Early signs I'm activated (racing heart, feeling far away, irritability, etc.):

.....

Grounding tools that help me most:

.....

People I can reach out to:

1.

2.

3.

My therapist or psychiatric provider:

.....

A phrase or reminder that helps me feel safe:

.....

If you're in crisis, you don't have to wait for an appointment

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline — call or text 988, available 24/7

Crisis Text Line — text HOME to 741741

Or contact your provider, or go to your nearest emergency room.

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