

Self Care Strategies

Keep a journal
Sign up for yoga or exercise class
Watch a sunset
Take a walk
Laugh
Ask for a hug
Have a good cry
Reward yourself for reaching a goal
Spend time in nature
Clean out your closet or drawer
Visit a friend
Bake or cook
Tell someone you love them
Make tea
Dance around the room
Make a list of your good qualities
Make something creative
Visit a friend and ask for support
Write a letter
Sing or play a musical instrument
Watch a funny movie
Read an inspiring quote or poem
Have a bath



This booklet is a compilation of information from Seeking Safety (2002) by Lisa M. Najavits, and materials developed by several Haven Society counsellors over the last 15 years. The information has been gathered through the development of our Strategies for Empowerment workshop. We would like to acknowledge all of the counsellors and clients who have contributed to this knowledge base. We would also like to acknowledge information shared through the annual training forum and Stopping the Violence counsellor training at EVA BC (Ending Violence Association of British Columbia).

Courtesy of Haven Society
Women's Counselling Program
2270 Labieux Rd, Nanaimo BC
Phone 250-756-2452



Healing from Trauma

Trauma is an experience where
our emotions, identity, spirit
and sense of the world
as an orderly, secure,
safe place
is severely
shattered,
shaken or
broken.

*The stars began to burn through the
sheets of clouds and there was a new
voice, which you slowly recognized
as your own.*

- Mary Oliver

What are the effects of trauma?

A traumatic experience or event may continue to exert negative effects on a person's **THINKING, FEELING, BODY, SPIRIT,** and **BEHAVIOR** long after the event has past. There are very dramatic events that may be traumatic such as: severe neglect, emotional, physical and sexual abuse, physical and sexual assault, accidents, medical procedures, illness, natural disasters, loss of a loved one, crime, and many other difficult life experiences. Many other less dramatic events and experiences may be just as traumatic and cause the symptoms of trauma, especially if the events occurred in childhood, such as: being bullied/teased, dental/medical procedures, illness, relationship dynamics, family financial loss or economic hardship, and school situations.

Initially, there are some general reactions to a traumatic event. When in danger or threatened, our bodies are programmed to **FIGHT, FLEE, FREEZE, FEIGN DEATH** or **MAKE FRIENDS** in order to survive. Our brains automatically react to traumatic events without our conscious choice, in that moment we don't have control over our reactions.

Different people can have vastly different responses to the initial trauma and can be affected for different lengths of time, even after the trauma is over.



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What if these are not working...

- Practice! It takes time to make these techniques powerful enough to work in the moment; be easy on yourself
- Practice the timing; speeding up the pace and starting sooner gets you focused on the outside world quickly
- Try grounding for a longer period of time (20-30 min)
- Notice which methods you like the best
- Start grounding early in the negative mood cycle; start when a substance craving just starts or when you begin to have a flashback; start before anger gets out of control
- Make up a card that outlines your best grounding methods and how long to use them
- Have others assist you - teach friends and family about grounding so they can help you before you become overwhelmed
- Prepare in advance - locate places at home, in your car, and at work where you have materials and reminders for grounding

Containment

I may need to work on grounding myself and then find a way to contain my physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual experiences. The following are some suggestions about how to contain or slow down overwhelming feelings until you can process them with a safe friend or counsellor:

- Focus on breathing slowly in and out through your nose (this helps to activate the parasympathetic nervous system)
- Use Grounding Techniques (on p. 7)
- Remind yourself that this is a flashback or reaction to past trauma and it will pass, it is not what is currently happening, and you are not crazy
- Imagine putting all the bad feelings in a container locked and hidden in a place where only you can access it; you are in control of when you want to get it out; pick a time when it is safe and someone who you trust is there to help you with those feelings
- Imagine your story on a video tape - fast forward through the parts that are too difficult to remember right now, or turn it off if it becomes too much; turn it on again when and if you are ready



More Physical Grounding

- Notice your body; feel the weight of your body in your chair, feel your socks and pants, feel your back, feel your connection in the physical world
- Walk slowly and notice each footstep and muscle movement; say “left” and “right” with each step
- Eat something slowly and describe or notice taste and texture with each bite
- Focus on your breathing, notice each inhale and exhale; follow each breath all the way in and all the way out; repeat a pleasant word to yourself on each inhale

Soothing Grounding

- Say kind statements as if you were talking to a small child, for example, “I am a good person going through a hard time; I will get through this”
- Picture the people or animals that you care about; look at photographs, draw them, or describe your connection to them
- Remember the words to an inspiring song, poem, or mantra that makes you feel better
- Remember a peaceful or comfortable place; describe a place that you find soothing, focus on everything about that place - the sounds, colours, shapes, and objects; imagine yourself in that place
- Say a coping statement, “I am a survivor;” “I can handle this;” “This feeling will pass”
- Plan a safe treat for yourself such as a warm bath, a nice dinner, or time doing healthy activities
- Think of things you are looking forward to in the next week - perhaps time with a friend, going on a hike, or getting a haircut



The intensity of how a person reacts to trauma may depend on:

- Whether there was a single event or a repeated/ongoing experience
- The number of traumatic experiences one has survived
- Age when the trauma occurred
- If the event was abuse, assault, or crime related, the survivor’s relationship to the perpetrator can affect the intensity
- The type of family you come from can influence the long term impact from trauma and past/present relationships in which you feel safe, loved, understood, and reassured may provide a buffer from trauma

The high levels of stress triggered by traumatic experiences cause symptoms such as increased anxiety, avoidance, or heightened fear response. In an effort to reduce this discomfort many people develop a variety of coping mechanisms to survive and manage.

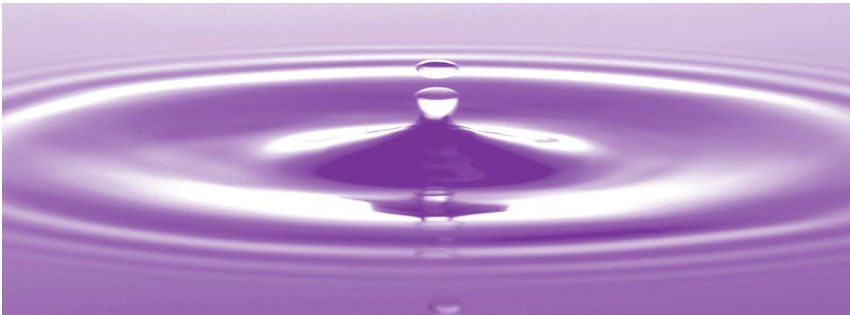
These symptoms and coping strategies do not arise due to any defect or inadequacy on your part. These are normal and understandable human responses to a traumatic event.

Triggers

Traumatic triggers can bring up body sensations, thoughts and feelings that are connected to a traumatic event in the past. Triggers may not make logical sense but they are telling our brain that we are in danger even if the danger is over. Triggers can create feelings of anxiety and panic or lead to the impulse to numb out or shut down.

Anything can be a trigger, but some common triggers are smells, sounds, certain people, anniversary dates, current stresses, media images etc. When we are triggered it can feel like we are going crazy, but triggers are a common response to trauma.

To cope with triggers, learn what your triggers are and have a plan for when they happen. When you are triggered it can help to stop, breathe, use your senses to get present, and try some grounding strategies (see p. 7).



***If you have experienced trauma, it can be overwhelming and discouraging.
Try to acknowledge and to continually remind yourself that you are a survivor.
No matter how hard your life is or has been, you have found the strength to get to this point.
Healing is possible!***

- Describe an everyday activity in great detail, for example, describe a meal that you cook; “first I peel potatoes and cut them into quarters, then I boil the water; then I make an herb marinade of oregano, basil, garlic ...”
- Play a categories game with yourself - work through the alphabet, name foods or animals that correspond with each letter, for example: A- apple, B- banana, C- cantaloupe... or think of types of sporting events, musicians, TV shows, colours, or places; find a category game that works for you to distract and refocus you
- Use an image to help gain distance; imagine that you are changing the TV channel on traumatic events, or you watch them move away on a train, or maybe they move by like the water of a river, or you can put a glass wall between yourself and your pain
- Count to 10 or say the alphabet, very s..l..o..w..l..y; you can also spell or do addition in your head
- Say a safety statement, “my name is _____; I am safe right now; I am in the present, not in the past; I am located in _____; the date is _____”



Physical Grounding

- Touch various objects around you - a pen, keys, your clothing, the table; notice textures, colours, materials, weight, temperature; compare objects
- Run cool or warm water over your hands
- Grab tightly onto your chair as hard as you can
- Jump up and down, stretch, or clench and release your fists
- Dig your heels into the floor or feel the ground under your feet; notice your weight on the ground
- Carry a grounding object in your pocket - a small object that will help you when triggered (a rock, piece of wood or fabric, or clay, anything that has some grounding or meaningful quality to you)
- Smell something that you like - a flower or perfume, or salty sea air, whatever brings comfort

Grounding may help you find balance!

Guidelines for Grounding

- Grounding can be done anytime, anyplace, anywhere, and no one has to know
- Use grounding when you are faced with a trigger, enraged, dissociating, or having a substance craving
- Keep your eyes open, scan the room, and turn the light on to stay in touch with the present
- Rate your mood before and after grounding to give you a reference point; before grounding, rate your level of emotional pain (0 -10, where 10 is the most pain), then re-rate it afterward, and notice if it has gone down
- Do not talk about negative feelings or write about them in your journal - you want to distract yourself from the negative feelings, not get more in touch with them
- Stay neutral - avoid judgments of “good” and “bad”, for example instead of “the walls are blue; I dislike blue because it reminds me of being sad” simply say “the walls are blue” and move on
- Focus on the present not the past or the future; grounding is more active than relaxation techniques, it focuses on distraction strategies, is intended to help relieve extremely negative feelings, and may be more effective than relaxation for trauma

Grounding Techniques



Mental Grounding

- Describe your environment in detail, using all of your senses, for example, “the walls are white, there are 3 wooden chairs, and there is a white bookshelf against the wall...”
- Describe objects, sounds, textures, colors, smells, numbers and shapes; you can do this anywhere to help you be present and keep yourself in the moment

Coping Skills

Coping skills help us work toward finding a balance between **NUMB** and **FLOODED** feelings to aid in healing.

Numbing and **Flooding** are both natural and normal responses to a traumatic experience; they probably helped you survive. Numbing and flooding are caused by triggers, which you may or may not be aware of. They may also be causing you further distress because you are ready to heal and they are interfering with your daily functioning.

Numbing is often characterized by:

Detachment	Headaches
Dissociation	Minimization
Denial	Forgetfulness
Exhaustion	Addiction
Shutting down	

Flooding is often characterized by:

Overwhelm	Rages
Panic Attacks	Anxiety
Flashbacks	Fear
Nightmares	Tremors
Hyper-alertness	



If you are overwhelmed with emotional pain try telling yourself the following:

“I need to detach so that I can gain control over my feelings and stay safe, but not totally become numb - I am striving to find balance.”

“Pain is what I am feeling, but it is not who I am. I feel like pain is all that exists, but I know that I have other emotions, I just need to reconnect.”

Common Coping Mechanisms and Symptoms After Trauma

Emotional

- Feeling irritable, confused, on edge, shaky, jumpy, emotionally fragile, intense anger, rage, fear, denial aggression, grief, guilt, shame, self blame, panic
- Feeling emotionally numb, shut down or overwhelmed
- Difficulty connecting with feelings and mood swings
- Sense of doom and/or foreboding
- Crying or sadness

Mental

- Constant replay of events in your mind
- Having nightmares, flashbacks or intrusive images
- Losing track of time
- Feeling panicky, and/or jumpy when someone touches you unexpectedly
- Difficulty concentrating, making decisions, speaking, reading/writing, making appointments, listening, and completing tasks

Behavioural

- Staying alert or constantly looking out for danger
- Having difficulty sleeping, eating, resting, or sitting still
- Freezing or becoming paralyzed when afraid or overwhelmed
- Hurting yourself on purpose so that you can feel and have some control
- Using alcohol/drugs/gambling/food/shopping etc. to avoid feeling pain or to create more feelings
- Losing pleasure or enjoyment from previously enjoyable activities, or changing your activities
- Withdrawing from relationships



Physical

- Hyper-sensitivity to noise, temperature, light, colour, smell, and/or emotional stimuli
- Reactions such as nausea, choking, shaking, fatigue, chronic pain, headaches, sweating, anxiety, agitation, rapid heart rate, teeth grinding, twitches, fainting, and difficulty breathing
- Spacing out or disconnecting from your body

Spiritual

- Loss of faith
- Disconnection from your spiritual community
- Life seems meaningless
- Loss of a sense of purpose

Over time, many survivors say they...

- Feel helpless, depressed, shameful, guilty, alone, and/or blame themselves
- Have difficulty in trusting others
- Experience memory loss
- Withdraw and isolate from others
- Try to please others so they do not get angry
- Have a chaotic lifestyle
- Feel empty or unable to name how they feel; maybe feel “not human” or “in another dimension”
- Feel worthless and lack confidence
- Do not feel entitled to their own feelings, opinions, or wishes
- Experience either reduced or increased sexual interest
- Have persistent physical difficulties such as headaches, chronic pain, or irritable bowel syndrome
- Experience difficulty finding the emotional middle ground, i.e., irritable, impulsive, emotional swings
- May be unable to find meaning, spirituality, and faith
- Notice a loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities

