Managing Symptoms of Trauma

If you have experienced a traumatic event, such as sexual assault or interpersonal violence, you may be feeling as if you are reacting to situations in a different way than you did before the trauma. These reactions are common, a normal reaction to an abnormal event. The most important pieces of healing from trauma are being patient and gentle with yourself, and being willing to try different things until you find the strategies that work for you.

The Language of Trauma

You may hear words that refer to some common reactions following a trauma. Here are some definitions to help you make sense of this new language:

- Trigger = Internal or external reminder cues of the trauma. Can occur in any of the 5 senses.
- Flashback = Temporarily losing touch w/ reality and feeling as if you are reliving the trauma.
- Intrusive Thoughts or Memories = Thoughts or memories of the trauma that are overpowering, making it difficult to think of anything else.
- Body Memory = Experiencing physical sensations in your body that feel as if you are reliving the trauma. Body memories may or may not be accompanied by flashbacks or intrusive memories.
- Grounding = Staying connected and focused on the present.
- Hypervigilance = Being overly aware of surroundings, as if all of your senses are on high alert.

Grounding Tools

Sometimes flashbacks and memories can be so strong that it can be difficult to stay in the present. At other times, everything can feel numb and it can feel as if the world is floating by. It is important to learn tools that help you stay grounded so that the ideas are readily available to you during these tough moments.

When you feel bombarded: Sensory Techniques

Sensory techniques can help you to ground in reality using the 5 senses. By changing the sensory input in any of the senses, we can, in a sense, “reboot” the brain and stop flashbacks, intrusive memories, and other symptoms of trauma.

To use sensory techniques, follow these important steps:

- Focus on the present (not the trauma)
- Take 3 slow, deep breaths
- Try doing an activity that changes your current experience in any of your 5 senses:
  1. Sight – What do you see in the room? Name 5 things.
  2. Taste – Suck on candy, drink something cold or hot, eat something sweet or sour, suck on ice, gum
  3. Touch – Varying textures, such as beads, chain, blanket, corduroy clothes, pets (can actually calm and lower anxiety), a safe person w/ permission
  4. Smell – Flowers, aromatherapy, sharp smells (certain foods), laundry detergent, candles, lotions, bubble bath (added bonus of touch)
  5. Hear – Safe person’s voice, music, loud noise, car horn, whistle, dog bark
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• If an activity in one sense does not work, try another. Sometimes it takes a few tries.
• After time, you will learn the activities that work the best for you.
• Remember, sensory techniques are not intended to stop you from feeling altogether. The goal is to help you stay grounded in the present.

Comfort Techniques vs. Distracting Techniques

There are times when you are out in the world that you will be confronted with memories or thoughts of the trauma. Sometimes you may feel present in your senses, but are still thinking about the trauma a lot or experiencing intense feelings. Comfort techniques are for use when you are safe and able to nurture yourself, whereas distracting techniques are for times when you need to “put away” from the trigger. You might use comfort techniques when you are at home without a deadline or with a safe person. Distracting techniques may be more appropriate when you are at school or work or when you have a deadline or project that needs your focus.

Examples of comforting techniques:

• Listen to music
• Curl under a blanket
• Cuddle with a pet
• Take a bath
• Light candles or incense
• Use art, collaging, journaling, or other creative outlets
• Call a support person and talk about what is happening
• Engage in spiritual practice

• Engage in safe comfort rituals from childhood
• Drink hot tea or hot chocolate
• Rock in a rocking chair
• Cry
• Hug a stuffed animal
• Finger-paint with chocolate pudding or play with play-doh
• Go to safe place (actually or in mind)

These techniques work best when you are in a space to experience your feelings for a time in a way that is gentle and kind to yourself.

Examples of distracting techniques:

• Watch TV (NOT Law & Order SVU!)
• Watch a funny movie
• Read a book
• Exercise
• Take a walk (only if grounded enough)
• Clean
• Make a list of things to do

• Call a support person and talk about other things
• Use Sensory Techniques, esp. touch and taste
• Play cards, checkers, computer games
• Engage in normal routine
• Window shop

These techniques are most effective when you need to focus on life and not on the trauma.
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Making a Grounding Tool Box

It can be hard to think of grounding activities when you are experiencing intense thoughts and emotions. That’s why it is important to plan ahead.

Follow these steps for making a grounding tool box:

1. Write down all techniques – make separate lists for comfort and distracting
2. Integrate sensory techniques into both lists
3. Make many copies of the list and put in purse, wallet, car, bathroom, bedroom, kitchen drawer
4. Gather all items needed to carry out each list at home
5. Use a box, basket, other container (you can make or decorate your own) so all items are together
6. Make a CD of favorite music
7. List journaling and other activities so you do not have to remember
8. Make a portable grounding kit to keep with you at all times.
   • Get a small notebook in which you can write your lists.
   • Write the lists, support people’s phone #s and, other inspiring quotes, comforting thoughts, or anything you might want to remember in those hard moments.
   • Always keep the notebook with you.
   • Make a “20 min” CD – 4 or 5 songs that you can play when you can take a brief time break in a safe place. When the CD is over, you know it’s time to get back to whatever you were doing.
   • Gather small items to help with sensory grounding, and put them in a small case together. Examples include gum, a stone, a chain, hard candy, a Koosh ball.
   • Keep distracting items such as a deck of cards, book, games or puzzles with the kit.

And finally, hang in there! Know that you are not alone, and healing from trauma is possible. It will get better with time.

*In the midst of movement and chaos, keep stillness inside of you.*

-Deepak Chopra