

Welcome to the Coping with PTSD Workshop



Goals of the Coping with PTSD Workshop

To be able to have an increased awareness of the symptoms of PTSD.

To identify and become aware of the types of triggers and ways to manage them.

To be able to identify skills that help when experiencing intense emotions, symptoms of PTSD.

To be able to recognize and identify skills for grounding.

This workshop is not a replacement for treatment by a professional, but an opportunity to review skills already learned or to identify new skills that could potentially be helpful in dealing with PTSD.

Introduction & Definitions

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Dissociation can make it difficult to function at times, and can feel very out of control. The primary goal of this workshop is to provide a variety of skills for coping and grounding. To begin however, let's look at some definitions.

PTSD

It is a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault. (from the American Psychiatric Association)

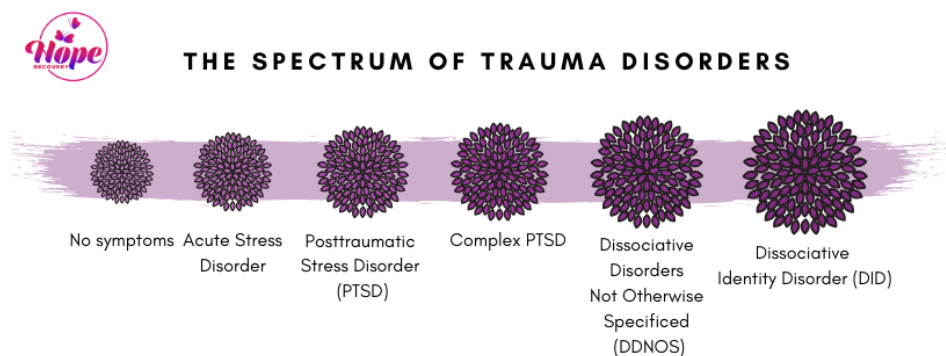
Complex PTSD

This was proposed by Judith Hermann and is defined as including the core symptoms of PTSD and including additional symptoms of emotional regulation difficulties, disturbances in relational capacities, alterations in attention and consciousness, adversely affected belief systems, and somatic distress or disorganization due to exposure or prolonged instances or multiple forms of interpersonal trauma often occurring under circumstances where escape is not possible. (from the ISTSS Complex Trauma Task Force)

Dissociative Disorders

Involves problems with memory, identity, emotion, perception, behavior and sense of self. (from the American Psychiatric Association)

As survivors of abuse and sexual trauma, it's not uncommon to struggle with posttraumatic stress disorder and dissociation. There are different levels of traumatic disorders that may be experienced.



Trauma robs you of feeling that you are in charge of yourself. To work toward healing, it's time to remind yourself you are in a safe place (if you truly are). If you are in a place that is not safe, you will find that the feeling of fear is necessary to protect you.

Over time, many survivors have developed coping skills that worked at the time, but are now disruptive to current functioning in the best way possible. Some of these coping skills have become problematic for work, relationships or other areas of life. We'll look at these various issues when talking about the PTSD.

What is PTSD?

PTSD is a common reaction to experiencing something traumatic. It has symptoms lasting longer than one month and requires being exposed to a traumatic event that involved death, threat of death, injury or threat of physical danger to the physical safety of yourself or someone else. Examples of these traumatic events are military combat, serious accidents, violent personal assaults or other violent traumas. It can impact a person's ability to function in every aspect of life – emotional, mental, physical, sexual, relational, financial, occupational and more.

Common Symptoms of PTSD

There are three core groupings. Intrusions, Avoidance and Hyperarousal. Here are some symptoms that many survivors experience.

Intrusions:

- Becoming distressed when reminded of the trauma (through senses)
- Experiencing distressing or recurrent memories or images, thoughts or perceptions of the trauma
- Feeling paralyzed from fear
- Flashbacks, Feeling the trauma is happening again
- Nightmares and bad dreams about the event
- Pounding heartbeat, sweating and/or rapid breathing when reminded of the trauma

Avoidance:

- Avoidance of people, places or things that remind you of the trauma
- Avoiding talking and/or thinking about the trauma
- Avoidance of people, places and/or things that are reminders of the trauma
- Emotional numbness
- Feeling detached or estranged from important people in your life
- Feeling on automatic
- Isolating from others and normal routines
- Losing a sense that you have a long-term future
- Overly negative thoughts and assumptions about oneself or the world
- Reluctance to talk about traumatic experiences

Arousal:

- Concentration problems
- Difficulty experiencing positive feelings
- Experiencing distressing emotions such as anger, fear or confusion
- Feeling anxious and fearful
- Feeling on edge or hypervigilant (jumpy, always on guard)
- Inability to recall key features of the trauma
- Negative thoughts or feelings
- Decreased interest in activities that used to be important

Sleep problems

Common Reactions with PTSD

- Aggression Toward Self or Others
- Alcohol and Drug Abuse
- Anxiety or Panic Attacks
- Chronic Pain
- Depression
- Despair and Hopelessness
- Dissociation
- Eating Disorders
- Employment/Education Issues – Changes in Attitude About Career or Studies
- Feeling Damaged or Worthless
- Gastrointestinal Problems
- Grief
- Guilt
- Health and Somatic Issues
- Identity Issues
- Isolation from your Support System
- Loss of Important Beliefs or Faith
- Overeating
- Relationship issues
- Risky Sexual Behaviors
- Self-Injury
- Shame
- Substance Abuse

What is Complex PTSD?

For chronic trauma that continues or repeats for months or years at a time the current PTSD diagnosis often does not fully capture the severe psychological harm that occurs with prolonged, repeated trauma. People who experience chronic trauma often report additional symptoms alongside formal PTSD symptoms, such as changes in their self-concept and the way they adapt to stressful events.

An individual who experienced a prolonged period (months to years) of chronic victimization and total control by another may also experience the following difficulties:

Emotional Regulation. Difficulty managing emotions and urges or impulses. This may include persistent sadness, suicidal thoughts, explosive anger, or inhibited anger.

Consciousness. Difficulty with severe and frequent dissociation, memory and attention problems. This includes forgetting traumatic events, reliving traumatic events, or having episodes in which one feels detached from one's mental processes or body (dissociation).

Self-Perception. Difficulty with believing messages of self, such as being stupid, unlovable and/or dirty. This may include beliefs about self as well as feelings such as being helpless, hopeless, lazy, shame, guilt, being worthless, and a sense of being completely different from other human beings.

Distorted Perceptions of the Perpetrator. Difficulty with seeing the perpetrator for who they are and about the relationship with the him/her. This may include attributing total power to the perpetrator, becoming preoccupied with the relationship to the perpetrator, or preoccupied with revenge. Survivors may believe that the perpetrator was wrong but inside be struggling with the feelings that go with this. This may also include primarily seeing the positive side of the perpetrator and focusing on that rather than the hurt they caused. In addition, may experience guilt over leaving them or setting boundaries with them even when the boundaries are necessary for safety for physical, emotional, mental and spiritual self.

Relationships with Others. Difficulty with trust and feeling isolated can be a big issue. Examples include distrust, or a repeated search for a rescuer. Issues with development of relationships and being able to interpret the intentions of others (whether they are good or bad intentions) correctly are experienced.

Somatization. Difficulty with physical symptoms that are undefined. Survivors experience physical symptoms that are difficult and physicians cannot find a reason for them. Examples may include ongoing headaches or other pains, stomach problems, elimination problems, and other symptoms which may be experienced but cannot be assigned to a specific diagnosis. Unfortunately, this means some survivors are labeled as hypochondriacs or that the pain is all in their head. Traumatic pain is real and while they may not fit a specific diagnosis, that doesn't make them any less real. Any physical symptoms are best looked into by a medical professional because it is documented that survivors of abuse are more likely to have serious medical issues compared to the average person.

Change in Beliefs. Difficulty with believing that the future holds anything good or that there is hope. There may be a lack of belief that others can be compassionate and trustworthy. This can manifest as a loss or lack of faith in previously held beliefs. This can also include a belief that the world is totally negative, hopeless and dangerous place.

Impact of PTSD:

Because of what has been experienced, survivors are constantly on guard and assessing situations for danger. Many survivors function as though they are in danger. Instant behaviors when on alert for danger could result in freezing, running or fighting, even when the situation isn't dangerous. Many times this isn't a processed thought, but an impulsive reaction.

Recovery is a series of changes that are ongoing. Moving forward, and moving backward almost like a give and take situation. Symptoms can improve and as the trauma is being

worked through, at different times, symptoms may increase for a while until that aspect of the trauma is resolved. The purpose of recovery is not to stop remembering, but to be able to deal with the intense feelings and to be comfortable in your own skin. It means having a greater ability to manage the emotions and issues that arise. In addition, the window of tolerance improves so that there is more room to deal with the memories that may come back from time to time. Rather being reactive however, you'll find you are now able to choose how to respond to them.

Facts About PTSD:

PTSD is treatable. Although you cannot change history, we can change the way history impacts your life now.

About 8 million adults have PTSD during a given year. This is only a small portion of those who have gone through a trauma.

About 10 of every 100 women (or 10%) develop PTSD sometime in their lives compared with about 4 of every 100 men (or 4%).

Survivors may avoid thinking and talking about trauma-related topics because the feelings associated with the trauma are often overwhelming.

Survivors may use alcohol or other substances as a way to avoid and numb feelings and thoughts related to the trauma.

Survivors may engage in self-mutilation and other forms of self-harm.

Survivors who have been abused repeatedly are sometimes mistaken as having a "weak character" or are unjustly blamed for the symptoms they experience as a result of victimization.

What Causes PTSD Symptoms?

When going through the traumatic experience, the brain kicks in certain activities. Here is a basic explanation of what happens that we continue to struggle with the symptoms of PTSD.

All humans (and animals) have a basic biological system with one goal: To insure your survival. The brain is responsible for this. It responds whenever it believes there is danger. The amygdala is responsible for that. This is your fight, flight or freeze reactions. When encountering a threat, the Thalamus releases stress hormones that send messages to the amygdala. This happens almost instantly.

Once the amygdala determines there is a threat, it increases resources in your body to help you with safety. Your heart rate increases, your breathing increases, you may be shaking, sweating or have other types of physiological symptoms. This is an immediate

response, and cognitive processing (pre-frontal cortex) is reduced or shut down. That means that thinking is secondary to the physical response and it's difficult to manage memories that are in order.

Memories are interrupted from developing short term memories into long term memories. This means there may be memories that you don't connect with, specific memories or chronological memories may not be there.

This also means that you didn't get to choose your response – your brain chose it for you.

Dissociation

Dissociation generally develops when an experience is too threatening or overwhelming at the time. Because of this, the situation is unable to be fully integrated, especially with the lack of emotional support. Many develop dissociation as a coping mechanism in childhood, though for some it is developed as an adult when experiencing ongoing abusive or traumatic experiences such as prolonged war, sex trafficking, domestic violence and other traumas that are ongoing.

There are several factors that make people more vulnerable including but not limited to:

- ❖ Young children
- ❖ Biological tendencies
- ❖ Insufficient emotional support
- ❖ Families who lack skills to deal well with difficult feelings and topics
- ❖ The severity of abuse or neglect
- ❖ The younger the age subjected to ongoing abuse and neglect impacts more vulnerability to dissociation
- ❖ Decreased limbic activity and increased frontal lobe activity
- ❖ Lack of sleep or excessive sleep problems
- ❖ Having moderate PTSD symptoms

Phobia of Inner Experience

There are three common reasons people avoid dealing with the inner experiences:

- ❖ Many people traumatized early in life did not get much help in learning how to understand and cope with typical intense inner experiences and overwhelming emotions.
- ❖ People tend to evaluate the inner experiences as “good” or “bad.” For example, Anger is bad and dangerous.
- ❖ Certain inner experiences are reminders of past trauma or as signals that something terrible is about to happen. Emotional and physical sensations may immediately remind them even if only unconsciously.

Many times survivors avoid the inner experiences by working too much, using alcohol and/or drugs, withdrawing from others and emotions, blaming others, eating disorders, increase criticism, and other mechanisms which help to avoid.

This means that to heal from the trauma, we need to begin to face the inner experiences. As we move through this workshop, we'll look at exercises that can help to improve facing the inner experiences that you may prefer to avoid.

It is time to move into looking at awareness and coping skills. We will go through several options for managing the symptoms of PTSD throughout the rest of this workshop, starting with triggers.

Triggers

A trigger is an event, object, or cue that elicits feelings of anxiety, fear, anger, or other types of distress. Triggers are often harmless, but have become associated with the original trauma. For most people with PTSD, triggers are not inherently dangerous, but remind them of their traumatic experiences. When you experience triggers, they are typically occurring due to a recognition or facing a situation which involves the senses (touch, sight, smell, taste, or hearing) and can involve locations, impressions and many other types of input gained from daily experiences. It is something that bears a literal or symbolic similarity to an aspect of an unresolved trauma.

Not all triggers are the same, but every survivor I've met has them. To summarize triggers in a global aspect, we are looking at people, places and things as triggers. There are several types of triggers that survivors may have.

If you are tired, sick, stressed or overwhelmed, you are more likely to be triggered. Triggers can also be more evident with work around certain aspects of your trauma. Let's look at several types of triggers as we get started.

Time Related Triggers

With time related triggers, we are looking at a variety of times. It could be certain times of the year, of the week, or of the day. One example of a time related trigger is an anniversary date such as a holiday, birthday, night time, or other time specific dates. Generally it is something that holds a traumatic experience on that time.

Place Related Triggers

Place related triggers are those situations where a specific place reminds you of the trauma, or puts you on edge. For example, a place that is triggering may be the grocery store where there are a lot of people and it goes far into the store and there is a fear of not being able to get out or of being unsafe. Perhaps you are in a situation where you have to go to or by the place where you experienced your trauma. Any of these situations could be triggering, especially if you did not realize that it could be triggering for you.

Relational Triggers

Relationships can be triggers in and of themselves. A perceived threat, or worry of abandonment by a loved one. Having someone make a comment that reminds you of something that you were told by your abuser, or even the normal struggles of relationships in general can be triggers. For example, perhaps someone you know is getting passionate or frustrated about something, and they raise their voice in talking about it. They may not be upset with you at all, or yelling, but because of having experienced raised and abusive voices during your trauma, a raised voice can create a lot of triggers during conversations. Hearing a comment that is perceived as critical toward you or interpreting a comment that someone is angry with you could be triggering. There are endless situations where there could be involved in relationships that are truly healthy, but you struggle to translate the conversation as a normal one with a variety of expressions.

Internal Triggers

Internal triggers can be emotional or physical. For example, having a sensation in your body, even common sensations such as pain, indigestion, cramping, certain positions of your body, and more. For survivors with Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) may find there are triggers inside due to issues that a part may be experiencing, or even a memory that arises from that part or from your unconscious mind. Internal triggers may be the most difficult of all the triggers to prepare for, as there are tons of changes in the body that could be experienced, including hormonal changes. Having your heart race, feeling nausea, having a stomach ache, or other internal things can be additional triggers.

Sensory Triggers

Sensory triggers are exactly what they sound like. They are triggers related to our five senses – touch, taste, hearing, smell and sight. Examples of sensory triggers are seeing someone that resembles the abuser, or someone who has similar traits to the abuser. Seeing a child or adult being berated by another person can trigger memories of your trauma. Sounds that are like someone in pain, someone crying, or screaming can be triggering. Hearing specific words or comments that replicate or remind you of the trauma. Being touched when you are unprepared, or having someone step within your personal space, or smelling of a cologne or perfume that your abuser wore. There are many triggers that fall under the sensory category.

Some questions to help you identify your triggers

1. What is a situation or experience that you find happens a lot that triggers you?
2. Where were you and what were you doing when you were triggered?
3. What happened with the trigger (describe it)?
4. What was your inner body experience of being triggered (out of body experience, anxiety, panic, flashbacks, nausea, etc.)?
5. What date, time of day, or season was it when you were triggered if you sense it could be time related?
6. What can you do to prepare for that particular situation or experience?

Coping with Triggers

One option with triggers is to use distractions or avoidance, which is a temporary coping skill. Ongoing avoidance will only serve to continue the cycle of the trigger and possibly even create greater difficulty with your triggers. Distraction or avoidance is only designed to give you time to develop coping skills to manage the triggers.

Anticipate the triggers. If you can use the information and questions above to recognize the trigger, when it happens, and in what setting it tends to happen, you can begin to recognize the warning signs of the trigger before it hits full force. Plan for that trigger you recognize. What are your options for coping with it? What can you do to manage it before it is overwhelming? Begin to use calming thoughts and affirmations to reassure yourself (or parts if DID) that it is a trigger, but you're safe currently. Remind yourself that you are no longer in that abusive situation, or if your abuse was as a child, that you are now an adult and have options to stay safe and cope with today.

Ask for support from those who you may have shared that you have experienced trauma. Support can also be from those who you can talk to about things other than the trigger, for example, talking with someone about a common hobby or other interest.

When triggered, sometimes you may feel that you have no options. It's important to remember that you have permission to change your mind as well as to step away for a moment to regroup and then move forward with what needs to be done. For example, if you are afraid of needles, it is okay to give yourself permission to relax, breathe and take an extra moment to regain your composure before get your blood work done. It's good to ask for what will happen, step by step.

Work on distinguishing the past from the present. Using grounding skills, it's important to ground as soon as possible to provide yourself with the ability to keep yourself in the present. It helps to have something that you connect with today, not the past. For example, a piece of jewelry that is something that you obtained in the recent months or years, not obtained during the abusive years. Then you can touch that and feel the texture, shape, temperature and other features about it. Speaking these things noticed with your voice aloud can really help. Carrying something like a small stone or worry stone that you can use for grounding to remind yourself you are in the here and now.

Be able to differentiate the differences between today and the past. Describe the differences with your voice. Notice your surroundings, your location, your clothing, your jewelry, the colors around you, the smells and other differences of today that didn't exist in your past.

Planning for Difficult Times

Survivors with Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) often have periods of difficulty. This tend to be weekends, night time, days of the week or month, holidays, anniversary dates, and having extended period of time alone.

It's important because of this to plan for these difficult times. Reasons for planning include dealing with feeling overwhelmed, inner chaos and confusion, inner conflicts without capacity for negotiation (DID), difficulty with time, time management and/or time loss, and difficulty setting priorities.

Begin early to look at what the anticipated difficult time is. For survivors with DID, work on communication with parts. Identify what normally happens for you and put together a plan. Plan early, not waiting until the event or time that tends to be difficult. Give yourself time to prepare and plan, to consider all the options. Once you make a plan, give yourself additional time to reflect on it and make any adjustments you think might be needed.

It's important to recognize that it's not the date or time or holiday that is the issue in itself, but it's what it represents to you. Here are some ideas for planning and managing difficult times.

Coping Skills for Difficult Times

Use different decorations for holidays and celebrations.

Plan what to do when you are anticipating a difficult time.

Be intentional about the similarities and differences between then and now so you can ground easier.

Use relaxation.

Plan healthy activities.

Make a list of activities to use to cope and ground.

Celebrate on different days than originally scheduled. For example, instead of celebrating on a triggering birthday, celebrate the next week.

Use good self-care.

Questions to Consider

What times tend to be your most difficult times?

When you have a difficult time, what happens (thinking, feeling, body reactions, etc.)?

How do you usually make a plan (think it through, spontaneously, etc.)?

What obstacles do you encounter with planning?

What techniques and skills do you use to help yourself with planning?

What has helped you in the past with difficult times?

List any triggers for which you know you need to prepare.

What are fears or concerns of various parts of yourself about a particular time?

List any triggers you know you need to prepare yourself for.

Skills for Coping with Symptoms

As covered so far, there are an extended number of symptoms that survivors with PTSD experience. This next section moves into looking at ways to cope. Not all of these skills work for all survivors. These are ideas that you can talk with your therapist or psychiatrist

about to determine if they are good ideas for you. As with any coping skill, do what is helpful for you. You should know that at times the first try doesn't work because you are nervous about trying it. It's a good idea to try various coping skills two or three times to give yourself optimal opportunity to see if it will work for you.

Coping skills can be like cooking skills. When you try a new recipe, the first time it may not taste very good. The recipe may need to be tweaked or you may need to just try cooking it again at a different time. Many times, with a little practice or a few small tweaks, the recipe has great results.

Sleep Disturbance and Nightmares

One of the most recommended ways to improve sleep are to have a regular sleep schedule. This includes going to bed and waking up at the same time daily, including the weekends. This would exclude regular naps.

Set up the room you sleep in to be comforting and relaxing. If you have a room in your home that feels unsafe, avoid sleeping in that room if possible. Set it up so that the light is comfortable for you. If you need complete dark to sleep, consider getting room darkening shades. If you fear sleeping in complete darkness, consider getting a night light that allows for a small amount of light but not enough to keep you awake.

Set up the room you sleep in so it's primary use is peaceful and for relaxation and sleep. Move into other rooms to do other activities rather than staying in bed. This may mean setting your room up and making adjustments for quiet or to have a soft background noise (use a noise machine, a fan or something else that can cover other sounds that could be triggering) and making sure your room is at a cool temperature that is comfortable for you. Avoid watching tv, being on your phone or laptop or other electronics.

Do things before bed that help you to relax. This may be taking a hot shower or bubble bath where you can self-soothe. Take time to journal, read (nothing scary or plots that wake you up) a book or article, or start a plug-in or diffuser with a calming scent. Avoid activities that wake you up emotionally, mentally or physically (such as avoiding exercise or scary movies).

Exercising several hours prior to bedtime can actually improve sleep for many.

Consider if you need a light snack to prevent middle of the night hunger, but avoid large amounts of food or drinks before bedtime. Avoid eating in bed.

Consider beginning to do relaxing exercises such as progressive muscle relaxation and focus on slowing down your breathing.

If you can't fall asleep after 20-30 minutes, get up and do something relaxing. Perhaps a warm cup of tea or hot chocolate. Avoid caffeinated drinks.

If you fear that someone will break into your home or room, consider putting a chair in front of the door and/or small PVC pipe (or its equivalent) in the windows to provide extra piece of mind to reduce the fear that comes with this worry.

When you wake up from a nightmare, remind yourself you are in the present through grounding skills. Speak out loud so you can hear your voice. Use landmarks in your room to remind yourself you are in the here and now.

Write out your nightmare and re-write the ending of it to where you are able to escape or you are stronger than your perpetrator. Repeat this exercise as needed. During the day, re-read this different ending daily until your brain begins to retain this new ending that makes it possible for your nightmare to reduce or change.

Journal when you wake up, if even for a few minutes.

Flashbacks and Memories

Survivors struggling with PTSD can experience flashbacks and memories at less than appropriate times and situations, such at work or in class. Here are some things that might help to deal with this.

Remind yourself that you are having a flashback, that what you are experiencing is not happening right now. Tell yourself that you got away and the trauma isn't happening right now in this time or place.

Notice your surroundings and see that you are not in the same place where you experienced the trauma, even if it may be similar to some extent.

Use grounding skills such as 5-4-3-2-1.

Focus on your breathing, and breathe slow and from the diaphragm. Make sure your breath out is longer than your breath in.

Give yourself something of comfort. A stuffed animal, a weighted blanket, your favorite object that is not associated with your trauma, a soft or comforting blanket or shawl, a comfortable and safe position, or even giving yourself a hug. The brain can't differentiate a hug from another person or from yourself. Gentle rub your arm or cheek if you prefer a different type of physical touch that is soothing and comforting.

Enlist support from someone who knows that you have been abused or assaulted and struggle with flashbacks and memories. Provide them with a list of ways they can provide help or reminders of tools you can use to challenge the flashbacks. Call or text them (if possible) and ask for help. Perhaps have a code word or sentence to let them know you are struggling so they can provide encouragement and help you with grounding.

Be patient with yourself. You just went through a difficult emotional experience that impacted you in multiple ways within your body. You may feel exhausted, hopeless and like it's never going to get better. But remember that you already are past the worst of it and you survived (the trauma), and this can and will get better too.

Feeling Anxious or Fearful

Again, reminding yourself that you are not in that abusive situation any longer is important. While doing that, focus on your breathing, breathing from your diaphragm. Exhale longer than you inhale, with slow breaths.

Relax as many muscles as possible, focusing on your shoulders and neck at least. Consciously let your shoulders fall.

Use progressive relaxation to help relax your shoulders and focus on your breathing.

Learn to say “No.” Assess whether you have the ability to take on activities or projects without creating more anxiety and stress. Consider your emotional and mental state and your ability to give your best at the activity you are considering. If you're more anxious and stressed at a given time, it's more important to nurture yourself than to take on extra projects that others (or even yourself) may be wanting you to take on.

Find a quiet space to give yourself calming messages, to meditate or to use affirmations that are soothing and comforting.

Take care of one thing at a time. Multi-tasking can create a lot of lost energy because you may be worrying about how to do all those tasks at one time, which can lead to more stress ultimately.

Remember to take care of your body, getting enough sleep, eating a healthy meal and getting adequate fluids.

Identify what is making you feel anxious or frightened at the moment

Fear can occur in an unfamiliar situation, and it helps to reassure yourself of what you can control in that situation. For example, in a new support group or therapy meeting, reminding yourself that you have the option to choose what to respond to, that you have the right and ability to leave the setting, and that you can choose to take the steps necessary to keep yourself safe.

Utilize your faith, meditation, or interact with nature to attempt to increase the amount of calm and peace you have.

Stop your negative thoughts. In the same nature, put any memories of your trauma into containment until you can safely deal with them.

If there are events occurring in the geographical area you live, or the news is highlight details of an abusive situation in the area, limit your exposure to media. Try to avoid news and social media that can create fear from the past as well as triggers.

Accept that fear is a feeling that normally is an alarm system of danger. But once you've assessed your situation for safety, remind yourself that your brain is hyper-sensitive to situations which may feel dangerous but are not truly dangerous. This is a common issue with PTSD.

Incorporation of Music

There is evidence that supports the incorporation of music as a part of recovery. Some inpatient programs incorporate music therapy into their programming. Music within individual therapy can also be beneficial. The use of music as a coping mechanism can help to ease overwhelming emotions and provide emotional self-regulation. Trauma and music both impact the brain (specifically the hippocampus, amygdala and prefrontal cortex. Music can stimulate these and help to recondition the brain back to healthy functioning.

Types of Music Uses

Songwriting

Using your words to write out a song that expresses what is inside, or what you'd like to see happen with your life or in managing an emotion.

Instrumental

Playing a musical instrument that you can get lost in, even engaging in gentle rocking with the playing of that instrument can help to reduce the distress of negative emotions and can add a calming presence between the sound and the movement.

Singing

This isn't about singing a song you know necessarily. It can be therapeutic to sing a song where the words speak to you and help you to express your emotions. Another type of singing though, is to sing the words in your heart. This can be very beneficial in treatment with your therapist.

Group Music

Joining with others in playing instruments, singing, or joint songwriting can have a positive impact of reducing the avoidance symptoms that PTSD brings on. A twist on this is getting involved in your local theatre where you can participate in plays that get in touch with emotions and bring a common bond with others.

Songs That May Share Your Thoughts or Encourage You

Secular

Ain't No Mountain High Enough – Gaye & Terrell <https://youtu.be/IC5PL0XImjw>

Everybody Hurts – R.E.M. (Raw emotion) https://youtu.be/5rOiW_xY-kc

Hero – Mariah Carey <https://youtu.be/0IA3ZvCkRkQ>

Hold On – Wilson Phillips	https://youtu.be/uIbXvaE39wM
I Will Survive – Gloria Gaynor	https://youtu.be/ARt9HV9T0w8
Lean On Me – Bill Withers	https://youtu.be/fOZ-MySzAac
Reach Out I'll Be There – Mariah Carey	https://youtu.be/UIT3dx4an9c
Rise Up – Andra Day	https://youtu.be/lwgr_IMeEgA
Today My Life Begins – Bruno Mars	https://youtu.be/rsqpdsgJxDc
Up – Shania Twain	https://youtu.be/-FMhUNSIxks

Christian

Grace Like A Wave – Elevation Worship	https://youtu.be/n22DM3swHqI
Oh My Soul – Casting Crowns	https://youtu.be/DjNZf878ISQ
Overcomer – Mandisa	https://youtu.be/b8VoUYtx0kw
Power – Elevation Worship	https://youtu.be/F6C6LLRf2Ow
Remind Me Who I Am – Jason Gray	https://youtu.be/QSIVjjY8Ou8
Strong Enough – Matthew West	https://youtu.be/knuHDPbE5es
You Are My Hope – Skillet	https://youtu.be/2GRE160g1KU

Grounding Skills

Grounding skills are used when you are struggling to stay present (dissociation), or to help when you are having flashbacks or severe anxiety. These can be used individually or with a group.

Use Exercises to Stimulate the Vagus Nerve

Bottom-up exercises can be utilized to de-activate the amygdala and to strengthen and regulate parts of the brain. These exercises can stimulate the vagus nerve which initiates information to the brain to start to calm down. Typically this is a very quick response. The best way to stimulate the vagus nerve is by breathing through your diaphragm. This decreases the activation of the part of your brain that is responsible for fear (the amygdala). This reduces emotional outbursts and dissociative symptoms. It also increases the part of the brain which allows you to think clearer.

Three Exercises for Diaphragmatic Breathing

1. Place one hand on your chest and the other one on your belly. Take slow and lengthy breaths so that you can feel the rise and fall of your diaphragm.
2. Place your hands behind your head, elbows facing out. Lean back slightly, and then breathe focusing on your breath.
3. Sit upright, straighten your back and bring your shoulders down and back. Place your hands under your thighs. Take long and deep breaths in a slow manner, focusing on the sensation of your breathing.

Grounding that uses our senses.

5-4-3-2-1

- ❖ It's important to use all of the senses when grounding. Some survivors have a sense or two that works better. In addition, any ability to speak the grounding makes even more impact. Identify the following and say them out loud. Describe them – what are they, when you feel them, identify texture, temperature, etc.:
- ❖ 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

Sight

- ❖ Assess materials for a hobby you enjoy (Pencils, markers, beads, etc.)
- ❖ Count pictures, chairs, books, or other items that are in multiple numbers
- ❖ Look at everything around you – name these things
- ❖ Watch the birds and squirrels
- ❖ Watch tv or watch a movie
- ❖ Work on a puzzle

Smell

- ❖ Cleaning liquids (do not sniff them, but use to clean normal)
- ❖ Essential Oils
- ❖ Flowers
- ❖ Light a scented candle
- ❖ Perfume
- ❖ Playdoh
- ❖ Sniff lavender or peppermint
- ❖ Spice

Sound

- ❖ Audio book
- ❖ Barking, chirping or other animal noises
- ❖ Describe a common task you do out loud
- ❖ Do math problems out loud
- ❖ Listen to a comedy (Check out Dry Bar Comedy or similar sites)
- ❖ Music
- ❖ Play a favorite movie
- ❖ Play an instrument (even if you can't play)
- ❖ Play a meditation or visualization podcast
- ❖ Read out loud
- ❖ Sing

- ❖ Talking out loud

Taste

- ❖ Bite into a lemon
- ❖ Brush your teeth
- ❖ Chew gum
- ❖ Coffee
- ❖ Hard candy
- ❖ Have chips and salsa and notice the flavor and texture (medium or hot may help more than mild)
- ❖ Hot Chocolate
- ❖ Soda
- ❖ Suck on a sour candy

Touch

- ❖ A favorite blanket or other thing with texture or softness
- ❖ Feel something with texture. Notice the colors, design, texture, temperature
- ❖ Feel your feet on the floor
- ❖ Hold an ice cube, frozen orange, or a frozen bag of vegetables in your hand
- ❖ Manipulate playdoh
- ❖ Massage your skin such as your cheeks, temples, arms, thighs, feet, etc.
- ❖ Pet or cuddle a pet
- ❖ Play with your jewelry
- ❖ Put a cold drink bottle to your cheek
- ❖ Put a cold or warm wash cloth on the back of your neck, or wash your face
- ❖ Rub a small, smooth stone (“Worry stone”)
- ❖ Run cold or warm water over your hands
- ❖ Splash cold water on your face
- ❖ Squeeze something
- ❖ Take a shower and notice the temperature (and notice the smell of the soap)
- ❖ Your hair (it might help to have it braided, in a pony tail, etc.)

Other Alternatives

- ❖ Breathe deeply and slowly in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- ❖ Call a friend who knows about your trauma and triggers and is a safe person.
- ❖ Call your therapist.
- ❖ Create a “safe place” in your mind, then utilize it when triggered.
- ❖ Find a physical activity to participate in.
- ❖ Focus on the here and now the best you can.
- ❖ Have a supportive person remind you it’s a flashback and not happening right now.
- ❖ Identify and name where you are physically – what building, what room.
- ❖ Look at the date and time on your computer or your watch.
- ❖ Pray.

- ❖ Put on soothing music that is from today, not the past, or loud music that will bring you back to today.
- ❖ Remind yourself this will pass – it's a memory.
- ❖ Replace negative statements that you identify, with some positive ones.
- ❖ Snuggle a stuffed animal.
- ❖ Take time to recover.
- ❖ Try to identify the trigger so you can address it specifically.
- ❖ Try to avoid blaming yourself for what you did or did not do during the traumatic event.
- ❖ Try to move your arms and legs to reduce the dissociation.
- ❖ Try to remind yourself that the worst is over because the trauma was the worst.
- ❖ Use focuses breathing
- ❖ Use positive affirmations.
- ❖ Use a lot of self-talk – remind yourself that you are safe now.
- ❖ Use visualization to regroup and focus on something besides the triggers.
- ❖ Use your creative skills – draw, write, scribble, paint, etc.
- ❖ Wear something that is from the present only, not from the past, and remind yourself it's from the present.
- ❖ Wrap up in a blanket, mimicking someone holding and comforting you.

Containment

Containment is used when there are memories that are flooding and you need to try to put away until you have time to address them in therapy or in a safe place. Containment is not stuffing or pushing the memories away, but attempting to stay in the here and now.

In containment you are taking the memories or flashbacks and intentionally picturing putting them in a safe place where they can be taken out later. For example, your therapist's filing cabinet, of a safe box. You can picture locking it there. Remember to take some cleansing breaths as you do this.

Containment Imagery Script

Allow yourself to be comfortable, either lying down or sitting up with your back, neck and spine fully supported. Begin by closing your eyes.

Breathe in and out, exhaling longer than you inhaled. Now begin to bring your attention to your breath – the direct experience of your breath – however it is... and however it changes. Allow yourself to softly focus your awareness on to the breath that is arising right now – the in-breath and the out-breath, the rising and the falling. If you can, try to follow one full cycle of the breath from the beginning of the in-breath through its entirety and then to the beginning of the out-breath through its entirety. Allow yourself the time and the space to be in direct contact with the breath throughout one entire cycle.

Breathe in and out, exhaling longer than you inhaled. As you continue to pay attention to the breath, you may notice distractions that arise. Just allow yourself to notice those distractions... any bodily sensations or any thoughts that may arise. If possible, allow

yourself to become aware of the separateness of those bodily sensations – notice how those sensations are separate and distinct from your thoughts, your ideas and your words.

Breathe in and out, exhaling longer than you inhaled. Now, as you continue with this focused awareness, you will notice how often you lose contact with the breath... maybe you become caught in a thought or an idea or plan, or maybe some other bodily sensations that pull your attention. When a distraction happens, simply notice that you have lost connection with the breath, and gently bring your awareness back.

Breathe in and out, exhaling longer than you inhaled. We'll begin now with a deep breath in through your nose... inhaling slowly and deeply. Exhale through pursed lips until all the air has been released.

Now we are going to be creating a container. It doesn't matter what kind of container it is, as long as it can "hold" any and all disturbing material. If you were going to develop such a container, what would it look like? Some people have used boxes, safes, trunks, or chest; others have used bookbags, knapsacks, or other pieces of luggage. It can be anything really, a tank, a submarine, and underground well – anything that suits you.

Breathe in and out, exhaling longer than you inhaled. Can you bring to mind an image of something like that. When you have that in mind, take a good look at it. What material is it made out of? How is it held together? How big is it? What color is it? Are there any markings on it? If there are markings, notice them; if not, that's fine. But I'd like you to put a note or a sign or an inscription of sort – a notation to indicate that this container will remain tightly sealed. It will remain tightly sealed until you wish to open it and retrieve something from it. Otherwise, it will remain sealed. It can be opened – but only by you – and it should be opened only in the service of your healing.

So once again, look at your container. Does it already have that message on it? If not, place it on there now.

Now, how does this container open? Are you able to open it by yourself, or do you need help? Is there a lock on it? If not, feel free to put one or several on it now.

Breathe in and out, exhaling longer than you inhaled. Once the locks are in place, we'll experiment with opening and closing them, locking and unlocking them. As you do that, notice how much, or how little effort it takes to open and close the container.

When you feel comfortable handling your container, you can think of something that you might put into the container, just for practice. Do whatever is necessary to open it up, and then place something in there. Something can be anything that may be distressing or disturbing to you right now. It could be thoughts or worries, bad feelings or bad memories... it could be something you have to do but not at this moment. Or it could be something that keeps you from being present with this exercise. It could be self-judgment, doubt, or pain. Whatever it is, you're going to put it into the container... whatever you need to do to get it in there, do that now.

Breathe in and out, exhaling longer than you inhaled. Once the disturbing materials are in, close it up and lock the container. Now breathe deeply as you look at the locked container, securely holding anything that you need or want it to hold.

Breathe in and out, exhaling longer than you inhaled. Notice how you feel in your body having set aside whatever distressing thing you put in your container. Can you sense that it is fully contained? Is there something that keeps it from feeling fully contained? If so, can we try opening your container and putting that in there as well? Remember that this container is yours and will hold anything and everything you need it to hold for as long as you need it to.

Breathe in and out, exhaling longer than you inhaled. Now imagine walking away from your container so that it is no longer in your sight. Notice the feeling in your body now that you are no longer burdened by what you put in the container. Notice your breath – your in-breath and your out-breath – and any sensations of relief you have in your body. Maybe your shoulders have dropped a bit, or some of the tension in your neck has subsided. Whatever feelings of relief you notice, breathe deeply and just notice.

Whatever you put in the container is now securely locked inside. It is for you to open whenever you wish to put things in or take them out.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is being intentional to pay attention in the present moment. This attention is the defining characteristic of mindfulness which focuses typically on awareness of thoughts, emotions and sensory perceptions.

It is optimal to have a place to practice this skill. Repeated practice increases the chance you will use this tool and it will work quicker when needed because you will have been incorporating it into your coping skills during practice. Mindfulness can address stress, acute or generalized anxiety symptoms, depressive symptoms and strong emotions.

Mindfulness of Breath

Find a quiet place where you can be uninterrupted for at least 10 minutes or longer. If you can, do this exercise at the same time every day.

Sit in a chair or on the floor with your back straight and your hands in your lap. Sit comfortably, with your body balanced on its own weight, not leaning against the chair or wall.

See if you can close your eyes or at least lower your eyelids. If you want to keep your eyes open, use an unfocused gaze, with eyes directed downward about 3 feet ahead of you.

Focus on your breathing and only your breathing. Feel the air going into your lung, note the pause between breaths, and then feel the air going out.

When your mind wants to wander, just remind yourself to go back to your breathing – watching and feeling the breath go in and out. Don't criticize yourself if your mind wanders, just notice the thoughts, and then go back to watching and feeling yourself breathing.

Try to do this for 10 minutes each day, every day. Once you've developed this skill, you can apply it into your everyday life in a variety of ways.

Other Tools for Grounding

Be compassionate and patient with yourself.

Bite into a lemon to use the sour taste for force you into the here and now.

Call your therapist.

Carry a small object (such as a colorful/irregular stone), and use it for tactile and sight grounding.

Create a "safe place" in your mind, then utilize it when triggered.

Find a physical activity to participate in.

Hold on to something cold like a bag of vegetables, an ice cube or a frozen orange.

Identify and name where you are physically – what building, what room.

Look at the date and time on your computer or your watch.

Keep a small container of play-doh available to smell and manipulate.

Put on soothing music that is from today, not the past, or loud music that will bring you back to today.

Remind yourself this will pass – it's a memory.

Replace negative statements that you identify, with some positive ones.

Smell perfume or a candle or another scented object.

Suck on a piece of hard candy.

Take time to recover.

Try to avoid blaming yourself for what you did or did not do during the traumatic event.

Try to move your arms and legs to reduce the dissociation.

Use visualization to regroup and focus on something besides the triggers.

Use your creative skills – draw, write, scribble, paint, etc.

Wear something that is from the present only, not from the past, and remind yourself it's from the present.

Wrap up in a blanket, mimicking someone holding and comforting you.

A Healing Exercise

Find a comfortable position. In your non-dominant hand hold a stress ball and squeeze it as hard as possible imagining that you are letting all the tension release into that ball. Watching the ball and noticing your squeezing motions may help you stay focused and present. When the ball is filled with your tension, let go of it and let the tension in the ball fall away from you.

When you feel calmer let go one last time, and switch to your dominant hand and choosing an object that you can easily hold in your hand which symbolizes a sense of well-being or healing for you. Hold it in your dominant hand. Imagining it holds all of the healing you need, safety, peace and calm, and let this healing flow from the object into your body.

Visualization

Visualization is used to help allow yourself to find inner peace and a place of safety. This visualization can be real or imagined but should incorporate enough detail that relaxation naturally follows. Some have questioned if this is increasing the practice of dissociation. It is not an exercise to induce further dissociation or an exercise of escape, but an exercise to help you find peace and calm in a situation where your emotions are overwhelming.

Find a quiet space with limited distractions.

The space should also be physically comfortable, with no extreme temperatures, so you can focus on connecting your body to thoughts of peace and calm.

- ❖ If you are using space in your own home, you can prepare this in multiple ways to be your ideal space. Consider incorporating elements of nature in your space, such as hanging planters, artworks featuring flowers or a beautiful landscape scene, or a natural souvenir from a recent trip, such as a seashell or jar of sand from your favorite beach.
- ❖ If you are using your space in a shared room (like a living room or home gym), consider putting up a screen to divide the space.

- ❖ Many colleges also offer meditation centers in their student life centers or in their university gyms. If you are a student facing the stress of mid-terms or finals, consider looking into whether your university offers a space like this.
- ❖ You can also use many beautiful spaces such as public gardens, parks or mountain trails if you are comfortable meditating in public. Many vacation destinations also offer meditation retreats, so you can even plan your next trip to help you ground and center.

Root your feet to the ground.

The process of grounding and centering requires that you become physically connected to the earth. The most effective way to position yourself is with your feet directly touching the ground. Try sitting in a chair with your feet on the ground, about hip width apart from each other.

- ❖ You can also ground and center when you stand. Place with your feet hip width apart and keep your arms hanging loose and comfortable at your sides. While you should stand tall, don't keep your knees too rigid as this could make you dizzy.
- ❖ You might be tempted to lie down. If that is the position you are most comfortable in, then you should do this. But most practitioners suggest that grounding and centering works best when your feet are in direct contact with the ground.

Practice better breathing.

Deep breathing is a key component of meditation and visualization. When you are meditating, do not breathe through your mouth or from your throat. Instead, breathe from your diaphragm.

- ❖ Your diaphragm is located in your lower abdominal muscles (or your lower belly). As you inhale, push out these muscles and feel your rib cage expand outward.
- ❖ Hold your breath for two seconds.
- ❖ Exhale by bring your diaphragm muscles back inward to your belly.
- ❖ In this method, you are breathing in and out through your nose, not your mouth.
- ❖ Breathing deeply from your diaphragm can effectively reduce stress and help you optimize the amount of the oxygen your lungs take in.

Be mindful of your breathing.

As you practice inhaling outward and exhaling inward. imagine that your body is going through a transformational process. As you inhale outward, imagine your body filling up with positive power. As you exhale and your push your abdominal muscles inward, imagine that you are releasing all of the negative forces in your life.

- ❖ Practicing this basic technique of accepting (inhaling) positive things and exhaling (repelling) negative feelings will help clear your mind for other calming thoughts.

Find a comfortable position and begin to slowly breathe in through your nose, and out through your mouth. Then picture a safe place for you (real or imagined), and go through the details of this place using all your senses. Remind yourself in this visualization that you are safe and okay.

Here are some visualizations that may be helpful.

Visualization Example for Safety & Relaxation

Picture yourself on a beach with snow-white sand. As far as the eye can see there is sand, water and palm trees. There is no one around. It's just you and your white tiger (or your favorite animal) that helps to keep you safe. You take a slow deep breath in through your nose, then blow it out through your mouth.

You decide on the perfect spot to lay your things and you spread out your beach towel. You're close enough to the water that when you sit on your towel, your feet touch the edge of the water. You sit down and notice how the water is so clear. You can feel the water come onto the sand enough to feel the perfect temperature on your feet. You lay down and take in a deep breath through your nose, and blow it out slowly through your mouth. Your animal lays down next to you and keeps an eye on everything around you.

You close your eyes and as you lay there, you can feel the warmth of the sun on your arms and face. You begin to feel warm and begin to relax your shoulders. You can feel a light breeze blowing, keeping the temperature perfect. As you look to the side, you can see the palm trees swaying ever so gently with the breeze. As you take a deep breath in and you can smell the flowered bush just outside of the sand. Slowly you breathe out through your mouth and release the energy in your shoulders.

You know you are safe here. You open your eyes and see your tiger is lying beside you and is very quiet and attentive to all of your surroundings. You close your eyes again. You can hear the water gently rippling onto the shore. As you lay there, you feel safe and you know that there is no danger here.

You notice that you can hear the sea gulls above the water. Then you hear a gentle splash. You sit up and before you there is a dolphin leaping out of the water. You can feel the smile on your face, as it looks like it is performing a dance for you. You take a slow breath in through your nose, and blow it out through your mouth. You can feel the peace inside you growing and your body relaxing. You relax your shoulders as you watch this dance. With that you are feeling calm and peaceful and you gather your things and you and your tiger return home.

Visualization for Centering and Grounding

Imagine you are connected to the Earth.

As you are breathing, close your eyes. Imagine your feet are rooted to the core of the earth beneath you.

- ❖ Pretend that your feet are sprouting roots, as if they were at the base of tree trunk. These roots connect you to all other beings in the Earth -- the soil, the air, the ocean, animals, and the sun.
- ❖ You can also envision yourself as a vine growing up from the earth or a boulder on the side of the mountain. But it should be an image that anchors you to the world around you.

Exert your energy downward.

As you breathe out and in, and imagine your feet sprouting roots, follow where the roots take you. They should go down and down, further and further into the soil until you find yourself in the center of the Earth.

- ❖ What does the center of the Earth look like? Is it hot, with flowing lava? You can throw any feelings of pain, frustration, anger or bitterness into the fire at the center of the Earth.

Push your energy upward.

After you have grounded yourself, you can then push your energy upward and outward. Imagine your torso as the trunk of a tree that grows and then forms into branches. The branches then burst into leaves in the warmth of the sun.

- ❖ You can stand up for this part of the visualization if you wish. Raise your arms up above your head as if they are the main branches of the tree splitting off at the trunk.
- ❖ As you raise your arms, alternate keeping your hands curled up in a ball and then stretching your fingers outward. This will help you feel more connected to the warmth and energy of the sun.

Feel your energy run from the roots to the branches.

In this final phase, you should feel a sense of connectedness between the roots of the ground and the branches of the sky. This will center you perfectly between the opposing elemental forces of the world: the earth and the sky.

- ❖ Try to practice the above process for at least three minutes, 3-4 times a week. With frequent practice, this method will feel more natural and you will be able to practice if for longer (ideally 15-20 minutes, or even longer if you wish).

Come back to stillness.

As you finish the exercise, imagine all the connected energy contained in your toes, fingers, arms, and legs begin to contract in the center of your body in your upper abdominal muscles. Imagine that this is where you can contain your grounded, centered energy in your body.

- ❖ Ask yourself if there is a word or phrase that represents this grounded state for you? Having a word or phrase that brings you to this state of peace and interconnectedness can help you ground yourself quickly in stressful situations, like in the middle of a busy commute or when you have had a frustrating conversation with a coworker.

Adapted from [WikiHow](#) “How to Ground and Center”.

Exercises of Relaxation

There are a variety of ways to relax both emotionally and physically. Some of these exercises may be new to you while others you have identified and worked on with your therapist. To help these exercises to work the most, try to clear your mind so you can focus on your breathing and

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Get into a comfortable position. A great position is where your body is totally supported, such as laying down on a bed or floor. Focus on noticing your breathing, and the way your muscles feel as you tense and relax them.

Start with your feet. Tense up your feet for approximately 4-5 seconds, then relax for 4-5 seconds. Repeat this.

Now tense up your feet and your calves. ****Note**** if you haven't stretched in a while, tense gently as you could find you end up with a Charlie horse. Hold for 4-5 seconds then relax for 4-5 seconds. Now repeat this.

Working your way up your body, now tense your feet, calves and thighs. Again, hold for 4-5 seconds, relax for the same and then repeat.

Follow this process up the rest of your body.

Your gluteal Maximus (Bottom)

Your lower back and abdomen

Your chest

Your shoulders and upper arms

Your lower arms and hands.

Now, shake out your arms and shoulders.

Square Breathing

Focus on feeling your breathing. Inhale through your nose slowly for 4-5 seconds. This is a normal breath in (avoid deep and shallow breathing). Hold that breath for 4-5 seconds. Exhale through your mouth slowly for 4-5 seconds. Hold your breath at that point. Now repeat this process.

Controlling Your Breathing

Get comfortable, and take a slow, normal breath in through your nose with your mouth closed, to the count of five. Focus on extending your abdomen while you breathe in slowly.

Pause for 5 seconds.

Exhale slowly through your nose or mouth to the count of 7. Say a soothing word to yourself as you breathe out (c-a-a-a-a-a-l-m).

Sighing Aloud

Sometimes breathing exercises are difficult. Instead of using a breathing exercise, let's try some intentional sighs. Give your best example of the following types of sighs.

Sigh of Frustration

Tired Sigh

Sigh of Relief

Body Scan

Body scans can be a great tool to be used in conjunction with therapy. Before using this tool, please discuss this with your therapist. It is a great tool to identify where you are having physical and emotional stressors in your body that you can target to work on to manage between sessions. A word of caution with body scans is that with some survivors having trauma stored in the body, doing a body scan, there is the potential to tap into the trauma that is stored there. Because of this, it is incredibly important to discuss this exercise with your therapist for using this tool between sessions.

Sit comfortably and close your eyes. Starting at your head, begin to notice any sensations within your body. Notice any tingling, sensations, pain, warmth or coolness, fear, constriction, or other types of elements within your body.

Identify where each is location and what you are experiencing at each part. There is no right or wrong process for this. Continue working from your head to your toes.

Once you have completed your body scan, let's begin to address what you're experiencing. If you feel tension it can be a good time to do a relaxation exercise. If you are feeling numb, you could rub that part that is numb to attempt to create a sensation. Don't worry if you can't initially change anything you are experiencing. This comes with practice.

Capturing and Challenging Your Internal Messages

As survivors we find ourselves challenged with the negative thoughts in our minds, particularly when experiencing the symptoms of PTSD. Changing the wording of your thoughts is an important skill to learn and to put into place. While some survivors use affirmations, others struggle to believe affirmations. Take this opportunity to challenge your thoughts and to find a compromise in the thoughts and beliefs you may experience.

Common Struggling Beliefs

“I’m not good enough.”

Anytime you try, you are good enough. You may not feel it, but it is truth. You are good enough just as you are. You are not all that you can do, but you are worthwhile because you are unique and are desiring to move forward with your life.

“I can’t do anything right.”

Let’s break this down. Thinking we can’t do anything right is a pretty big accusation of ourselves. It’s important to remember that there are things you can successfully do, and you can build on those things. Think about the little things you have done well. Don’t think about all the things you have yet to learn and do. Maybe you are a great cook. Maybe you are good at writing. Maybe you are great at taking tests. Maybe you are a good friend. All of these things aren’t about perfection, but about doing well. You can do something right. When you find something you do right, when you find something you are good at, write it down.

“I’m never going to recover.”

Recovery is a series of tiny and small steps. We may take two steps forward then slip one step back. Take a look at six months ago in your life. What has improved in your recovery since then? Did you choose to go to therapy? Did you share something important that six months ago you would have never shared? Did you binge eat or purge multiple times a week six months ago and today you binge or purge only once a week? Did you want to die six months ago and see no hope for life and today see some hope for tomorrow? Hold on and write out every little positive step you take from this day forward – no matter how big or small. No matter how perfect or messy – you are still moving forward in your recovery. You’ll never forget, but it will get easier to remember what happened without all the pain and distress.

Be Kind, Gentle and Compassionate

It can be really easy to criticize everything you do in your life. It may be a frequent thought that you should be perfect. But who is perfect? Not everything is on a report card where A passes and B fails. In the grading system, there is a lot of room for success in the middle. There are a lot of grades between A and F.

Did you just have a flashback? Give yourself comfort and compassion. How would you treat someone else who had that same flashback? You deserve no less of that compassion than they would.

Did you say “yes” to too many things and couldn’t keep up? Forgive yourself for trying to be helpful or trying to take the pressure off of someone else. Forgive yourself for not being able to complete everything within the deadline. You are human. Give yourself permission to say “no.” Not accomplishing everything we set out to do in the time we believe we should have completed it is a learning opportunity to see what is realistic for us to accomplish based on our personal experience.

Are you trying to accomplish everything at once all by yourself? Give yourself permission to ask for help. We were not created to be alone. It's okay to ask a friend to help with a task. It's okay to ask a friend for support to get through a difficult time or memory. It's okay to find a safe place to share and find community in this journey of recovery. You do not need to recover alone. Feeling alone, join a support group. Does that feel too intimidating right now? Find a group that involves others with a common interest. Give yourself permission to be part of a community of people. Everyone has down days. While not everyone may have flashbacks, everyone knows what it is like to struggle with someone (whether they admit it or not). Give yourself credit for taking each step forward.

Did you try something new and not do it well? Give yourself credit and kudos for trying it. It takes courage and strength to try something new. Many people won't try – they stay stuck where they are. You took a step to move forward in recovery. Even if the first attempt wasn't successful, doesn't mean you won't be successful for the next time or even five tries in the future. Don't give in to defeat. Remember babies fall many times when learning how to walk. You don't learn recovery tools immediately. You've struggled with coping skills that haven't been the healthiest. You developed them because you didn't know what else to do and they worked. Now, you are safe, you have more choices and it is going to take repetition and practice to put the new skills into place.

Comforting Yourself

There are several ways to comfort yourself when you are needing a hug or safe touch to help you calm yourself and no one is around or you are not comfortable with anyone touching you.

Gently rub your arm or hand and verbalize in a soft voice that you are safe, or another calming message.

Crossing your hands and interlocking your thumbs, bring your hands to your chest and tap your chest with your fingers using one hand then the other. This is a very gentle left then right motion. Just breathe calm and think peaceful and soothing thoughts.

Wrap yourself into a hug. You can do this by placing one hand under your arm pit and then taking your other hand and placing it over your opposite shoulder. This allows you to be able to in an effect, hug yourself much like you would give someone a good hug who is needing comforted.

Caring For Your Inner Child

The trauma we experienced from the beginning of the abuse or sexual trauma we experienced, has been related to growing from that child inside. When we were small, if we were loved and nurtured and felt safe, that inner child helped us to have better coping skills to deal with trauma. For survivors who did not have a stable, loving experience as a child, there was likely a failure to develop trust and develop negative beliefs about self – “if I had been better, they would have loved me.”

Nurturing that wounded child inside you can help you to cope with the pain of your trauma as well, particularly if you are in recovery from childhood abuse. There are some things you can do to help your inner child, which in turn can help you as well.

Create a safe place for your inner child. A place that is comforting. Perhaps that is a room in your home where you can have things that are comforting for you, and add in some things that your inner child would enjoy. You can create a place in your mind that is safe as well. A place you can communicate and care for him or her.

He or she needs safety. Let them know that you are safe and that he or she can trust you. That as an adult now, you can provide protection. Tell him or her that you love them and they deserve to be loved and respected.

Speak softly and gently with your inner child. What messages would you have wanted to hear when you were little? You can now provide those healing messages of hope and love.

Your inner child wasn't responsible for what happened to them, and he or she has nothing to feel guilty about. Use this time to not only let your child know they are safe, but that it wasn't their fault. Reinforce this to yourself as well. As a child, you couldn't do anything to stop the abuse that happened. Your inner child needs to know they couldn't stop it either.

Ask your inner child questions. What would help you know that you are safe? What would show you that you are loved? What is something that makes you excited?

If you want to explore your inner child further, see the worksheets at the end of these handouts.

Using Distraction

It's important to give yourself space and time to focus on something other than recovery. It's also okay to use various things to distract you from your PTSD symptoms while you develop other skills to manage. Distraction is not a long-term fix, but a temporary use to help you regain control of your anxiety, your emotions or to focus on something while you put away the memories for a while.

Here are a list of hobbies and activities that you can do to relax or distract.

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| 1. Aircraft Spotting | 42. Cake Decorating |
| 2. Airbrushing | 43. Calligraphy |
| 3. Acting | 44. Camping |
| 4. Amateur Radio | 45. Candle Making |
| 5. Animals/pets/dogs | 46. Canoeing |
| 6. Archery | 47. Cartooning |
| 7. Arts | 48. Car Racing |
| 8. Aquarium (Freshwater & Saltwater) | 49. Ceramics |
| 9. Astronomy | 50. Cheerleading |
| 10. Backgammon | 51. Chess |
| 11. Badminton | 52. Church/church activities |
| 12. Baseball | 53. Cloud Watching |
| 13. Base Jumping | 54. Coin Collecting |
| 14. Basketball | 55. Collecting |
| 15. Beach/Sun tanning | 56. Collecting Antiques |
| 16. Beachcombing | 57. Collecting Artwork |
| 17. Beadwork | 58. Collecting Hats |
| 18. Beatboxing | 59. Collecting Music Albums |
| 19. Becoming A Child Advocate | 60. Collecting RPM Records |
| 20. Bell Ringing | 61. Collecting Sports Cards (Baseball, Football, Basketball, Hockey) |
| 21. Belly Dancing | 62. Collecting Swords |
| 22. Bicycling | 63. Coloring |
| 23. Bicycle Polo | 64. Compose Music |
| 24. Bird watching | 65. Computer activities |
| 25. Birding | 66. Cooking |
| 26. BMX | 67. Crafts |
| 27. Blacksmithing | 68. Crochet |
| 28. Blogging | 69. Crocheting |
| 29. Board Games | 70. Cross-Stitch |
| 30. Boating | 71. Crossword Puzzles |
| 31. Body Building | 72. Dancing |
| 32. Bonsai Tree | 73. Darts |
| 33. Bookbinding | 74. Diecast Collectibles |
| 34. Boomerangs | 75. Digital Photography |
| 35. Bowling | 76. Dodgeball |
| 36. Bridge Building | 77. Dolls |
| 37. Bringing Food To The Disabled | 78. Dominoes |
| 38. Building A House For Habitat For Humanity | 79. Drawing |
| 39. Building Dollhouses | 80. Dumpster Diving |
| 40. Butterfly Watching | 81. Eating out |
| 41. Button Collecting | 82. Educational Courses |

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| 83. | Electronics | 128. | Illusion |
| 84. | Embroidery | 129. | Impersonations |
| 85. | Entertaining | 130. | Internet |
| 86. | Exercise (aerobics, weights) | 131. | Inventing |
| 87. | Falconry | 132. | Jet Engines |
| 88. | Fast cars | 133. | Jewelry Making |
| 89. | Felting | 134. | Jigsaw Puzzles |
| 90. | Fencing | 135. | Juggling |
| 91. | Fire Poi | 136. | Keep A Journal |
| 92. | Fishing | 137. | Jump Roping |
| 93. | Floorball | 138. | Kayaking |
| 94. | Floral Arrangements | 139. | Kitchen Chemistry |
| 95. | Fly Tying | 140. | Kites |
| 96. | Football | 141. | Kite Boarding |
| 97. | Four Wheeling | 142. | Knitting |
| 98. | Freshwater Aquariums | 143. | Knotting |
| 99. | Frisbee Golf – Frolf | 144. | Lasers |
| 100. | Games | 145. | Lawn Darts |
| 101. | Gardening | 146. | Learn to Play Poker |
| 102. | Garage Saleing | 147. | Learning A Foreign Language |
| 103. | Genealogy | 148. | Learning An Instrument |
| 104. | Geocaching | 149. | Learning To Pilot A Plane |
| 105. | Ghost Hunting | 150. | Leathercrafting |
| 106. | Glowsticking | 151. | Legos |
| 107. | Going to movies | 152. | Letterboxing |
| 108. | Golf | 153. | Listening to music |
| 109. | Go Kart Racing | 154. | Locksport |
| 110. | Grip Strength | 155. | Lacrosse |
| 111. | Guitar | 156. | Macramé |
| 112. | Gunsmithing | 157. | Magic |
| 113. | Gun Collecting | 158. | Making Model Cars |
| 114. | Gymnastics | 159. | Marksmanship |
| 115. | Gyotaku | 160. | Martial Arts |
| 116. | Handwriting Analysis | 161. | Matchstick Modeling |
| 117. | Hang gliding | 162. | Meditation |
| 118. | Herping | 163. | Microscopy |
| 119. | Hiking | 164. | Metal Detecting |
| 120. | Home Brewing | 165. | Model Railroading |
| 121. | Home Repair | 166. | Model Rockets |
| 122. | Home Theater | 167. | Modeling Ships |
| 123. | Horse riding | 168. | Models |
| 124. | Hot air ballooning | 169. | Motorcycles |
| 125. | Hula Hooping | 170. | Mountain Biking |
| 126. | Hunting | 171. | Mountain Climbing |
| 127. | Ice skating | 172. | Musical Instruments |

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| 173. | Nail Art | 217. | Roleplaying |
| 174. | Needlepoint | 218. | Running |
| 175. | Owning An Antique Car | 219. | Saltwater Aquariums |
| 176. | Origami | 220. | Sand Castles |
| 177. | Painting | 221. | Scrapbooking |
| 178. | Paintball | 222. | Scuba Diving |
| 179. | Papermaking | 223. | Self Defense |
| 180. | Papermache | 224. | Sewing |
| 181. | Parachuting | 225. | Shark Fishing |
| 182. | Paragliding or Power Paragliding | 226. | Skeet Shooting |
| 183. | Parkour | 227. | Skiing |
| 184. | People Watching | 228. | Shopping |
| 185. | Photography | 229. | Singing In Choir |
| 186. | Piano | 230. | Skateboarding |
| 187. | Pinochle | 231. | Sketching |
| 188. | Pipe Smoking | 232. | Sky Diving |
| 189. | Planking | 233. | Slack Lining |
| 190. | Playing music | 234. | Sleeping |
| 191. | Playing team sports | 235. | Slingshots |
| 192. | Pole Dancing | 236. | Slot Car Racing |
| 193. | Pottery | 237. | Snorkeling |
| 194. | Protesting | 238. | Snowboarding |
| 195. | Puppetry | 239. | Soap Making |
| 196. | Pyrotechnics | 240. | Soccer |
| 197. | Quilting | 241. | Socializing with friends/neighbors |
| 198. | Racing Pigeons | 242. | Spelunking |
| 199. | Rafting | 243. | Spending time with family/kids |
| 200. | Railfans | 244. | Stamp Collecting |
| 201. | Rapping | 245. | Storm Chasing |
| 202. | R/C Boats | 246. | Storytelling |
| 203. | R/C Cars | 247. | String Figures |
| 204. | R/C Helicopters | 248. | Surfing |
| 205. | R/C Planes | 249. | Surf Fishing |
| 206. | Reading | 250. | Survival |
| 207. | Reading To The Elderly | 251. | Swimming |
| 208. | Relaxing | 252. | Tatting |
| 209. | Renaissance Faire | 253. | Taxidermy |
| 210. | Renting movies | 254. | Tea Tasting |
| 211. | Rescuing Abused Or Abandoned
Animals | 255. | Tennis |
| 212. | Robotics | 256. | Tesla Coils |
| 213. | Rock Balancing | 257. | Tetris |
| 214. | Rock Collecting | 258. | Texting |
| 215. | Rockets | 259. | Textiles |
| 216. | Rocking AIDS Babies | 260. | Tombstone Rubbing |
| | | 261. | Tool Collecting |

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| 262. | Toy Collecting | 279. | Weightlifting |
| 263. | Train Collecting | 280. | Windsurfing |
| 264. | Train Spotting | 281. | Wine Making |
| 265. | Traveling | 282. | Wingsuit Flying |
| 266. | Treasure Hunting | 283. | Woodworking |
| 267. | Trekkie | 284. | Working In A Food Pantry |
| 268. | Tutoring Children | 285. | Working on cars |
| 269. | TV watching | 286. | World Record Breaking |
| 270. | Ultimate Frisbee | 287. | Wrestling |
| 271. | Urban Exploration | 288. | Writing |
| 272. | Video Games | 289. | Writing Music |
| 273. | Violin | 290. | Writing Songs |
| 274. | Volunteer | 291. | Yoga |
| 275. | Walking | 292. | Yoyo |
| 276. | Warhammer | 293. | Ziplining |
| 277. | Watching sporting events | 294. | Zumba |
| 278. | Weather Watcher | | |

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Additional Resources

Some of these resources and apps are designed for veterans but the applications can be beneficial for anyone struggling with PTSD symptoms.

Calm App (Fee based app) - <https://www.calm.com/>

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-i) -

<https://www.veterantraining.va.gov/apps/insomnia/index.html>

Insomnia Coach App - https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/insomnia_coach.asp

PTSD Coach App - https://www.ptsd.va.gov/appvid/mobile/ptsdcoach_app.asp

Rethinking anxiety: Learning to face fear. <https://youtu.be/jryCoo0BrRk>

Tools for Coping with PTSD and Dissociation - <https://www.hope4-recovery.org/tools.html>

Looking for a way to see how you are doing with your PTSD symptoms? Use the PTSD symptoms checklist from time to time (once a quarter or every 6 months) to see where your symptoms are improving.

Feel free to print out the following mood log to share with your therapist or psychiatrist if you are wanting to track your moods as well as your trauma symptoms.