

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA



A document to
help understand
trauma
and the effects it
may have



Liverpool University Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma refers to the way that experiencing highly distressing events can overwhelm a person's ability to cope, resulting in a lasting negative psychological impact. People can experience these events differently, and there is no "normal" way to respond.

WHAT IS A TRAUMATIC EVENT?

A traumatic event is usually an extremely stressful experience, which could happen to you personally or that you may witness/hear about.

People who work in highly stressful jobs where they are more likely to witness death, injury or danger are more likely to experience trauma and its psychological effects, for example hospital staff and emergency workers.

Not everyone who is exposed to these events experiences psychological trauma, and people can be affected in different ways.



WHAT HAPPENS TO MY BODY?

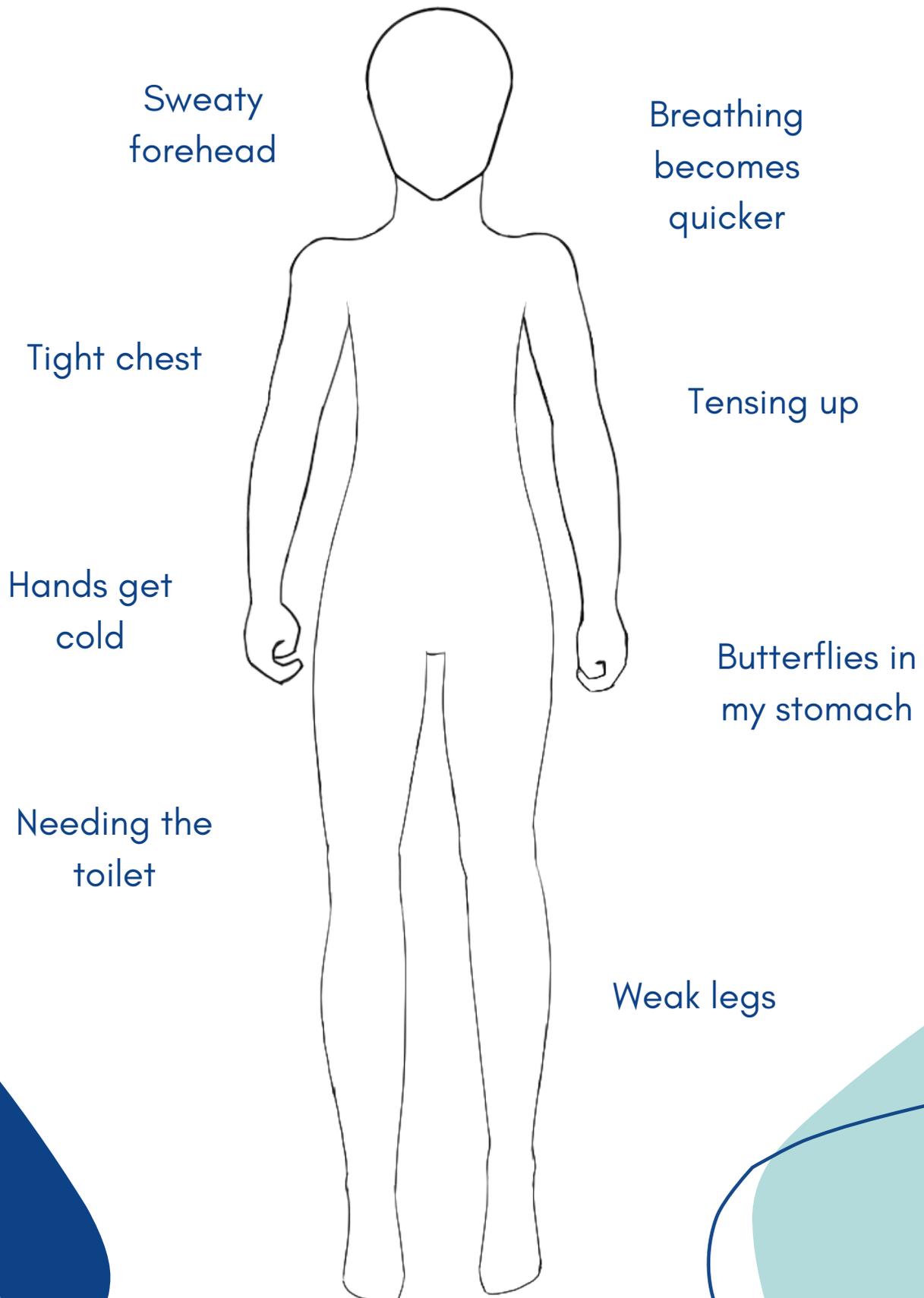
When faced with a stressful situation, the body can automatically go into a “fight, flight or freeze” response. This is when the autonomic nervous system kicks in involuntarily and tells the body to respond to the danger in different ways, for example:

- Increased heart rate and breathing
- Tense muscles
- Dilated pupils

A person may fight or take action to get rid of the danger, flee to get away or freeze and be unable to move. Everybody is different and it's important to remember that this is a normal physiological reaction to a stressful situation.



WHEN EXPERIENCING FIGHT OR FLIGHT, IT CAN FEEL LIKE...



HOW CAN I FEEL AFTER EXPERIENCING TRAUMA?

Everyone can respond differently, however, there are some key characteristics that may mean you are experiencing a response to trauma rather than other emotional reactions, such as anxiety and/or low mood.

- Constant thoughts/being reminded about the event.
- Feeling triggered by certain smells, images, memories, places.
- Nightmares about the event.
- Flashbacks or intense memories whilst awake.
- Feeling more anxious when having memories about the event, e.g., increase of heart rate, sweating, agitation.
- Feeling numb or detached from the environment and your emotions.
- Feeling constantly on edge, finding it hard to relax.
- Experiencing heightened emotions such as sadness and anger that are impacting your day-to-day life.
- Avoiding reminders of the event, e.g. places or people.



WHAT HAPPENS AFTER I FEEL THIS WAY?

It is normal to experience difficult thoughts and feelings for a period of time. For a lot of people who have experienced a traumatic event, things start to get better gradually once your body has processed what has happened. However, sometimes these feelings can last longer and start to affect a person's life more intensely. It may start to impact your work and your ability to do your job, as well as your existing relationships and day-to-day functioning.

If you feel like things are getting worse or not resolving for more than a month after you first started to experience difficulties, it might be helpful to seek professional help.

You might find that you are beginning to avoid certain places/people that remind you of the traumatic event, and whilst this might be helping you to cope in the moment it is not a helpful long-term coping strategy.



THE ROLE OF VALUES

Our values can be described as the things we consider most important to us, both in our personal and professional lives. Some examples include love, friendship, respect, kindness, and achievement. Living in a way that aligns with our values can help us maintain a sense of control and have a positive impact on our well-being.

On the other hand, living in a way that does not align with our values can make us feel out of control of our emotions.

For example, if kindness is important to us but we don't show ourselves kindness when we are struggling, we wouldn't be living in a way that is true to ourselves and our values.

It can be helpful to think about what is most important to you and if your current actions reflect your values. If they don't reflect your core values, what can you try or do differently to rectify this?



COPING STRATEGIES

When dealing with trauma, some specific coping strategies can be helpful to try and ground yourself back into the here and now, especially if you feel like you are reliving the traumatic experience or are experiencing the fight, flight, freeze response.

Scripts can be available online and guided videos are available on places like YouTube.

Grounding techniques - 5,4,3,2,1 method;
5 things you can see, 4 things you can feel, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell, 1 thing you can taste.

Muscle relaxation - focuses on alternating between tensing and relaxing different muscle groups throughout the body.

Breathing techniques - box breathing; in for 4, hold for 4, out for 4, hold for 4 imagine going around a box.

Mindfulness practice can help you focus on the here and now. Examples of mindfulness practice include relaxation breathing, safe place imagery, mindful eating, etc.



SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

It can be difficult to care for yourself when you are experiencing trauma and going through a difficult time. It is important to try and be kind to yourself and it can be helpful to think about what might have worked well in the past, what brings you pleasure and joy, and what can reduce stress.

Be kind to yourself, it can take some time to adjust and that is okay. Engage in self-care and have some relaxation days if you need to.

Some people can find talking re-traumatising, but for some it can be helpful. Sometimes talking can help relieve the emotions you are feeling, and people who have experienced the same event may be feeling the same way.

Spend some time doing activities you enjoy doing and which align with your values. This could be going to the gym, exercising, going for walks, meeting family and friends.

If you feel like you need extra support, seek professional advice. You can also contact the inhouse Staff Support Service for further advice/guidance.



SUPPORT SERVICES

Below are some services that can offer further support and advice if needed

LUHFT Staff Support Psychology and Counselling Service:

<https://staffhub.liverpoolft.nhs.uk/working-with-us/staff-psychology-service.htm>

Samaritans

24 hour helpline/email providing support to anyone in distress

116 123 or [joesamaritans.org](https://www.joesamaritans.org)

Talk Liverpool

NHS talking therapies for people aged 18+ and registered with a Liverpool GP

0151 228 2300

Maximus

Mental health support to help people return to/remain in work

<https://atw.maximusuk.co.uk/contactus/>

Hub of Hope

Mental health support database providing support

<https://hubofhope.co.uk/>

RASA

Offers support and advocacy to those affected by sexual abuse

www.rasamerseyside.org

Life Rooms

Recovery college offering psychological support and courses

www.liferooms.org





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<https://www.liverpoolft.nhs.uk/professionals/occupational-health-and-wellbeing>

This document was created by trainee clinical psychologists on behalf of the Staff Support Psychology Service within LUHFT.

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