



How the body responds to trauma

Many people who have experienced sexual trauma question the way they reacted to the danger at the time, and how they reacted afterwards. Often survivors blame themselves for not acting differently at the time of the trauma and may experience shame or guilt about it. Others are confused by the difficulties they experience in coping after the trauma ends.

When we learn more about how the body functions, our reactions usually start to make sense.

Our body's reactions to immediate danger

When we are under threat or in danger, our bodies have internal response systems that prepare us to fight or flee from the danger as a way of surviving.

It happens like this...Once the brain has detected danger, it sends a signal to the body and muscles are then tensed, the heart beats faster and chemicals such as adrenalin are released into the blood. This response happens in less than a second. The action has kept humans alive from predators for centuries and is the same system that attempts to keep us safe in modern times.

When the danger we face becomes overwhelming, we are terrified, and there is a sense of no hope of escape, the body can 'shut down' and 'freeze'. A person may pass out, go limp or take their mind elsewhere. The 'freeze' response is not a conscious decision, it is an automatic body response to situations in which we feel powerless or hopeless.

A person may not feel the pain of what happens and may not have clear, ordered memories of the event afterwards. Memories from trauma are stored in the brain in a different way to other memories so often seem sketchy, confusing and disordered at a later date.

Another survival response in attack or traumatising situations is to 'befriend' or appear to 'go along with' the abuser/assailant in an attempt to look for a chance of escape or to calm the abuser/assailant so they do less harm.

All of these reactions are common, normal, automatic and happen for both adults and children. They are designed for survival; to keep us alive.

When the danger has passed, there is another system in our body that is designed to 'reset' itself back to a calm 'baseline'. The brain tells the body there is no danger and it can relax now. Different chemicals are released into the blood to calm the body. Yawning, stretching and sighing are all part of the system to calm the body.

These systems are designed to work together in our bodies to keep us safe when there is danger and to relax us when there is no danger.

Healing from trauma can take time. The brain needs to learn that trauma experiences from the past are no longer a threat. The body needs to learn new, healthier ways of coping when it feels stressed.



Our body's reactions to trauma over time



When we are exposed to major trauma experiences (including child sexual abuse and sexual assault), changes in the brain can occur and the fear response can become 'trapped' in our body. The brain can become 'stuck on', expecting something bad to happen, constantly looking out for danger and preparing the body to fight or flee. This can show up as anxiety, panic attacks, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), chronic pain and other challenges.

Or a person can become 'stuck off', which means the brain and body shut down. This can appear as depression, lethargy, exhaustion, chronic fatigue and other symptoms.

Some people can stay either 'stuck on' high alert or 'stuck off', while others can constantly swing between being on high alert to shutting off. All of these reactions can be exhausting and confusing.

Small, everyday things in the environment can 'trigger' the brain into a fight-flight-freeze trauma response. A trigger is a reminder of the original danger. It is like the original trauma experience is happening all over again. Different people are triggered by different things.

Some things are more predictable as triggers. For example, someone who was sexually abused as a child may find having a medical examination of their body to be a trigger. Other triggers are less obvious.

A trigger can be a sound, a smell, a time of year, a suburb, an anniversary date, certain words, being in a room alone with someone, physical touch and a range of other things.

Being triggered can cause someone to fight (become physically or verbally aggressive), to flee (run away), or to freeze (shut down, dissociate or zone out). The person can react as if the original trauma experience is happening, even if there is no danger at all. It is an unconscious response and out of the person's control. It can be frightening for both the person experiencing it and any onlookers, particularly for those who don't understand how trauma affects the brain and the body. After dissociating or zooming out, the person may not be aware of what just happened.

Living life in this traumatised state can be both exhausting and debilitating. Some people turn to taking alcohol and other drugs to numb their feelings and calm themselves. These attempts to cope often result in adding other challenges, and don't resolve the situation.

Trauma and suppressed feelings can be like a splinter under the skin - they can fester and become worse unless they are brought to the surface for healing.

It can be a huge relief for people who have survived trauma to hear that their responses are normal and to learn more about why they behave the way they do. It is also reassuring to know that these challenges don't need to be permanent. People can change the way they function in everyday life.



Resources and services in WA

There are many things you can do to look after yourself and promote recovery from a traumatic event or situation. A **Care Package** for adults who have experienced sexual trauma is available on the SARC website. The package explores difficulties commonly experienced by trauma survivors, and offers suggestions for coping and healing.

The **Sexual Assault Resource Centre (SARC)** is a free 24-hour emergency service providing medical and counselling services for people who have experienced a recent (within 14 days) sexual assault. Counselling for any sexual assault/abuse experienced recently or in the past is also available to people of all genders aged 13 years and above. Call SARC on (08) **6458 1828** or Freecall **1800 199 888**.

Police assistance and reporting
(not emergencies)

Call 131 444

Emergency Call 000 Police, Fire, Ambulance