



Coping with Trauma Reminders

In *Coping with Trauma Reminders* you will learn what type of reactions and reminders you might expect after a trauma and learn to develop strategies to help manage these reminders and recover more easily. Trauma reminders can be almost anything related to your specific experience. These reminders can include certain smells, sights, sounds, even feelings that are connected to your trauma. Because these memories are often powerful, you might react when you think about them. In this book you will learn what type of reactions you might expect and learn to develop strategies to help manage these reminders and recover more easily.

Introduction

The focus of these books is to help empower individuals to be able to more effectively cope with traumatic life events. These e-books are built from solid scientific evidence. This evidence has shown that when people know what to expect and how to best deal with different demands related to trauma, they are able to more effectively manage traumatic stress and find ways to grow personally from the experience. It is also true that everyone has a limit, so it is critical to know what the signs are that point to being completely “upside down” when dealing with trauma and when to seek outside support or professional help.

The books in this series are:

1. *The Way Ahead*
2. *How to Get Support During Recovery*
3. *What You Tell Yourself Matters*
4. *Coping With Trauma Reminders*
5. *What Not to Do!*
6. *Getting Professional Help: Step by Step*
7. *Calming Skills: The Essentials of Managing Traumatic Stress.*

We have provided options for you to purchase all of the books as one large book or individually depending on what your needs are.

The book presented here is an overview book that describes how you can best work on helping your own recovery. The book is entitled “*Coping With Trauma Reminders*”. We hope you find it helpful.

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The Way Ahead

This book is designed for one thing and one thing only—as a practical guide to help you cope more effectively with an experience that has deeply affected your life, possibly turning it upside down. There is a series of six books, each with its own focus on different aspects of trauma recovery.

Before we discuss how to cope with trauma reminders, I would like to explain what is involved in dealing with a tragic life experience and how you can best help yourself, and your loved ones, to start your journey to recovery. Each book is a “pick up and go” workbook with specific exercises and tools to help you help yourself. I will be extremely practical and direct in this book. When people face life’s unpredictable tragedies, I have found that they do not have time for idle chat or psychobabble. We now turn to discuss how to deal with situations, people, even thoughts that remind you of your trauma.

What are Trauma Reminders?

Trauma reminders can be almost anything related to your specific experience. These reminders can include certain smells, sights, sounds, even feelings that are connected to your trauma. When you went through your trauma, your memory systems of your brain went into high alert often generating very strong memories of the event. This is a natural response. It’s a way of trying to learn as much as possible about things that are threatening or dangerous. Because these memories are often powerful, you might react when you think about them. In this book you will learn what type of reactions you might expect and learn to develop strategies to help manage these reminders and recover more easily.



Trauma Reminder Reactions. Trauma reminder reactions can include strong physical reactions such as shortness of breath, feeling sweaty, feeling faint, nausea, for example. You might also experience thoughts and feelings as if the trauma were happening again. These reactions can be quite strong and occur when something reminds you of what happened. The reminders are sometimes difficult to anticipate and they can be very subtle. For example, simply hearing a car horn can be a reminder if someone had been in a car accident where the horn was stuck afterwards. Learning what reminders you have that create strong physical and emotional reactions can help you to feel more in control and less afraid of having a reminder trigger you.

Managing Trauma Reminders

Trauma reminders are intense memories related to the trauma experience or memories that connect in an indirect way to the experience. For example, hurricane survivors often describe a racing heart or emotional upset when the wind blows harder than normal. Or, a

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person who has experienced an assault might be upset when he or she sees a person who looks a little bit or smells a little like the attacker. The challenge with these memories or “reminders” is that they often are unpredictable. They can come when you least expect them. This can cause you to be more “on edge” and fearful of the feelings that come with a reminder. Sometimes people change their lives in order to avoid these reactions making it difficult to get through the trauma and move forward.

We recommend that a way to help yourself with these reminders is to learn how to confront a reminder, to take it on sort-of-speak. Of course this will not be easy, but you can learn strategies to help you do this. It is normal to be a little afraid about confronting negative feelings, but you can do it. If you can, begin to think about the trauma as a memory that is not dangerous or threatening, but something extremely important that happened in your life. This can help you. Recovering from trauma includes grieving for “the way things were” before the trauma as well as trying to find a way to move forward. Part of the way forward is to learn to manage these reminders.

In order for you to be able to confront your reminders you need to figure out what they might be for you.

These can include:

- The place where the trauma took place, or a similar place.
- People who are related to the event or look similar.
- A movie or music that has some connection to the trauma.
- Having discussions with others about the trauma.
- Other strong emotional experiences or distress.
- Anniversaries related to the timing of the event.

Which trauma reminders are you aware of that cause you some distress?

1. _____ (1 to 10)

2. _____ (1 to 10)

3. _____ (1 to 10)

4. _____ (1 to 10)

Learning About Your Trauma Reminders. Identify how upsetting this list of trauma reminders is to you. On a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being extremely upsetting and 1 being not at all upsetting, label how distressing each one is for you. Just thinking about these reminders means that you are working on getting better. This is not easy! You should feel good about beginning to create this list. By reviewing your list you can see how much

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distress you are experiencing from your reminders. If you see that you have a lot of numbers above 5, you might consider reading *Calming Skills: The Essentials of Managing Traumatic Stress* to learn some important stress reduction skills. In this book you learn specific strategies to help calm yourself down making it easier to confront your reminders rather than dreading them.

You should be proud of yourself if you were able to list several reminders and rate them. This alone is a way to confront your reminders. If you were not yet able to do this exercise,



that's ok. Come back to it later and try to just get one reminder written down. In the future you could look at trying to determine more and more reminders if there are more so that you can begin to deal with them. Once you have identified all of the major reminders that cause you the most distress, you can begin to develop a plan or strategy for confronting these on a daily basis. Remember, the memories

of your trauma are not dangerous. They hurt, but they are not dangerous. This is a good way to ease into the process of managing your trauma reminders. For example, you might set a very achievable goal to think about the first reminder for 10 minutes (or 2 minutes if this is more realistic) once a day. Once you've done this you can increase your time. Confronting your trauma reminders in this way will get easier over time which will make you feel more in control over your recovery.

Some people find writing about the experience—or about the trauma reminders themselves—to be very useful. The more you write about or think about the trauma or its reminders, the less distress you will typically feel about these memories. Again, setting a goal that is realistic is essential. Deciding to write for just 5 minutes about what happened can be very therapeutic. You then want to gradually increase the amount of time writing, but only in doses that you feel confident you can do. If you set unrealistic goals, you will not be able to do them and that will make you feel worse.

If you find that your distress keeps getting worse over time, even though you have worked hard on confronting your trauma reminders, then you should consider seeking out a good trauma counselor to help you. Sometimes traumas, for whatever reason, get stuck and we need help to get over them. Anyone can have this experience. Finding someone to help is an important thing to do. Specific therapies such as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy or Cognitive Behavioral Therapy with Exposure are very effective. See the book *Getting Professional Help: Step by Step* for more information about finding a therapist.

Skills to Deal with Your Trauma Reminders. What skills do you need to help you manage a trauma reminder? First, you need to be able to calm yourself down. Trauma reminders can cause your heart to beat faster, your blood pressure to rise, your breathing to increase, etc. Using stress reduction strategies like calming breathing, progressive muscle relaxation and positive imagery can be very helpful. We describe a breathing exercise to help you. The *Calming Skills: The Essentials of Managing Traumatic Stress* book can provide you several techniques to help you with this. To be successful with these techniques, you need to

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practice them just like any other skill. If you try using these techniques after practicing only once or twice, they may not work as well as if you had been practicing them once or twice a day for many weeks.

BREATHING SKILL: Learning how to calm your breathing is very important in coping with trauma recovery. We recommend that you sit quietly and just notice how you are breathing. Then slow your breathing down a little and concentrate on counting from 1 to 5. The exercise is outlined below:

- Hold your breath and count to 5 (Do not take a deep breath first)
- When you reach 5, breathe out slowly and say the word "relax..."
- Breathe in slowly for three seconds, "1...2...3 in."
- Breathe out slowly for three seconds, "1...2...3 out."
- Say the word "relax" to yourself every time you breathe out
- Repeat and notice where your body feels more relaxed.

Practice this strategy of breathing several times a day. This will help you to develop a real coping skill that you can use if you get upset by something that reminds you of the trauma. Once you can recognize when you have been “triggered” and you have learned how to calm yourself, then you can develop a strategy for how to manage the reminder.

However, sometimes you might find that you get upset and cannot figure out why. Don’t worry about it. Your mind is very effective at finding little things that can remind you about the trauma even without you realizing it. It is not



critical to identify every reminder or trigger or confronting every one. Just knowing how to calm yourself by using relaxation strategies and knowing when to reach out to friends and loved ones are two very helpful tools you can use to help you recover. It is also helpful to realize that for most people trauma reminders fade over time and generate less and less distress. Remember, the reminder itself is not dangerous and you can learn to manage it.

Remember that reminders will be worse during certain anniversaries related to the time of your trauma (e.g., spring time, or during the holidays, etc.). Planning for these experiences will help you. You can find ways to recognize what happened and also to do something that can help you to move forward. For example, reaching out to a friend, loved one, or counselor during these times can be very helpful to get through them.

Step by Step Managing a Trauma Reminder. Here are some specific techniques to help you deal with a reminder if it is upsetting to you. Realize that your reactions are temporary and that you will get through this. Try to go back to thinking about what you were doing before you were “triggered.” Use your calming strategies such as slow and calming breathing.

Consider distracting yourself by using techniques that bring you back to the “here and now.” This can help you to move your mind away from your trauma-related thoughts and feelings

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and give you a greater sense of control. Try to refocus on things that are around you right now, like where you are, what you were doing before the trigger occurred, etc. You might get a drink of water or splash water on your face. These ideas can help you to gain control over the reminder.

Find someone to talk to about what is happening to you. Getting support from a trusted friend or family member is very helpful. Create a list of distractions like exercising, reading, listening to music, writing, etc. When a trigger occurs, do something from your list. This can help you to move through the reminder and realize that it does not last forever.

Skill Building: Confronting Trauma Reminders. The key to confronting trauma reminders successfully is to go after a trigger and then use your skills to manage your emotional reaction without avoiding the experience. You need to let your distress lessen as you confront the reminder. This may feel uncomfortable at first, but it is very important because it will actually reduce the level of distress you feel the next time you confront a reminder or experience a trigger in the same way. If you avoid the reminder after you have confronted it but before your distress lessens, then you are strengthening the power of the reminder rather than lessening it.

One way to confront your trauma reminders is to create a trauma reminder list. Write out all your trauma reminders, starting with the least distressing to the most upsetting. Then “go after” the least distressing reminder first. Move up the list to the harder reminders as you gain more confidence. Remember, confidence is very important and it builds on itself. As you gain strength, you will feel as though you can manage more things and that you are getting through this successfully.



One way to help you to see your confidence grow is to build a success calendar. Each day, jot down the ways in which you confronted a trauma reminder. For example, if you were able to think about the least upsetting reminder on your list for 10 minutes today when you were only able to focus on that reminder for five minutes a week earlier, write this on your calendar as a major success. This specific recognition of success is very helpful. The more ways you can recognize your successes, the more confidence you will build.

For example, Sherry was very afraid to go back to the place where her accident occurred. After she learned that she could face her other, less intense reminders, she decided to set a goal to go back to the scene of her accident with a friend. She planned this for several weeks, working on her thoughts that the place was no longer dangerous and her ability to calm herself was very good. Her confidence increased considerably when she was able to go to the accident site. This gave her the confidence she needed to feel as though she can move on with her life in more ways as well.

Summary

In this book we have outlined ways for you to manage different reminders of your trauma so that you can regain a stronger and stronger sense of control over your recovery. The key to this is to learn how to calm yourself down, figure out what types of things are “triggers” for you, and to develop a specific plan to confront your triggers to gain a greater sense of confidence in dealing with them. Below we offer some helpful hints for this process and a worksheet for you to develop your plan.



Helpful Hints to Deal with Reminders

- Tell yourself that you are safe and that the trauma is over and is not happening again.
- Tell yourself that you are going to be ok. You just need to get through this “trigger episode” and you will feel better soon.
- Say to yourself “That was then and this is now. I’m moving forward not backward!”
- Take some calming breaths and imagine a place where you feel safe.
- Excuse yourself to a private place to calm yourself and get back to the “here and now” (drink some water, splash water on your face, etc.).
- Realize that with each trauma reminder you manage successfully, you are getting stronger. Having intense feelings is normal and you are not going crazy.
- Tell yourself, “This too shall pass!” when dealing with a reminder and the emotions it triggers.
- Describe your feelings about your trauma reminders to someone who will listen effectively.
- Take a “trauma break” and find something to do that is fun or distracting.

Helpful Tips

Soothe Yourself. Listen to soft music, take a hot bath, sit outdoors, get a massage, practice yoga, say a prayer, or do whatever relaxes you. See the book *Calming Skills: The Essentials of Managing Traumatic Stress* for more ideas.

Take Care of Yourself. Maintain healthy behaviors such as eating well and exercising regularly. This doesn’t mean you need to take on a restrictive diet or exercise five hours a day, just make healthy food choices—especially when you are shopping—and take opportunities to exercise (e.g., walk instead of drive, take the stairs instead of the elevator, carry your groceries instead of pushing a shopping cart). Be creative. A little change can go a long way.

Do No Harm. Limit harmful behaviors such as avoiding other people, drinking excessively, using drugs, overeating, or harming yourself to avoid emotional pain. Anticipate and prepare for times when you may be inclined to engage in harmful behaviors by not having alcohol,

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illegal substances, or junk foods available.

Stay Connected. Stay connected with your family and friends. They can provide you with the support and comfort you need to recover. You might feel like you don't want to be connected or want to be alone. You should overcome this urge. Try making plans for social events. Commit well in advance to getting together with family and friends. Then, if at the last minute you don't feel up to it, you will feel compelled to follow through. You'll be glad you did.

Be Kind to Yourself. Go slow and be kind and easy on yourself. Ask yourself how you would treat others who have gone through a similar experience. Forgive yourself. Take the time you need to grieve your losses. Realize that life will get better.



Have a Routine. Maintain or develop a steady routine. Try to go to bed and wake up at the same time each day. Have regular meal times. Build room in your schedule to stay active and involved doing the things you enjoy. Use your routine to carry you through those tough periods. Maintaining this stability every day will help you to manage better during times of high stress.

Have Some Fun. Do pleasant activities that you enjoy or enjoyed in the past. Reengaging in pleasant activities, even if they do not feel "right" at first, is an important step in readjusting after trauma. Identify some things that you enjoy (or enjoyed in the past), make plans to do them and then carry out your plans. By doing things you enjoy, you will enhance your mood and become more hopeful about the future.

Feel Good. Allow yourself to have positive emotions and experiences. After all, who said you have to feel bad all the time? Even during times of profound sadness (for example after the death of a loved one), we should still have good feelings. For example, people from different cultures all around the world often *celebrate* and *rejoice* after a funeral. This helps to begin to heal the hurt. Often trauma survivors do not feel they are entitled to feel good or to heal. They may feel guilty, embarrassed, or ashamed about what happened and may use this to deny themselves positive emotions or experiences. This is not the time to beat yourself up or punish yourself. Positive emotions can help refresh and refuel you so that you have energy to take on the challenges of recovery. If you feel a positive emotion coming on, let it happen just as you would a negative emotion. If you have an urge to do something fun, or are invited by others to have some fun, take the opportunity.

Take a Break from Feeling Bad. Consciously take a break from your worries and problems or limit the amount of time you allow yourself to feel bad. For example, schedule a time to feel bad, say from 7 p.m. until 8 p.m. each evening. Then, hold yourself to this schedule.

Nothing like this has ever happened to me before... Even if you have never experienced a true, perhaps life-threatening trauma before now, you probably have experienced other

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distressing, negative events, where your memories were not easy to control. Have you ever lost a pet, had a romantic relationship end unexpectedly, lost a loved one, or been terribly hurt in another way? Remember how long it took you to deal with these events? Remember that despite your best efforts to forget the experience, the memories and thoughts of the event demanded your attention for quite awhile? Remember how reminders of the event triggered painful emotions and memories for you? This is like the re-experiencing that occurs with your trauma memory. Like these other painful memories, even though you will never entirely forget the negative experience, your trauma memory will lose its emotional power over time. Tell yourself that this, too, shall pass.

Plan

This week I will:

1. Develop a list of as many triggers as I can think of and rate them on the level of distress they cause me on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being most distressful.
2. Practice my relaxation skills at the following times:
 - a. _____(day of the week)
 - b. _____(time of day)
 - c. _____(location of relaxation)
 - d. I will do this _____(how many times this week)
3. Actively confront my least distressing trigger by thinking about the trigger for _____(choose a length of time you are 99% confident you can do). I will use my calming skills to help me achieve my goal.
4. Talk to a friend to get support in dealing with my reminders.
5. Reward myself by writing down on a Success Calendar when I've achieved my goals as well as giving myself something special (_____write out what you can give yourself). This can be something little (e.g., piece of chocolate) or something larger (e.g., massage).