



# What Not to Do

After a trauma, many people look for ways to feel better. But some of the ways people choose to do this are not helpful and can slow the recovery process. In *What Not to Do*, you will learn about three negative behaviors people use when dealing with a traumatic event. You may be using these negative strategies without even knowing it, so I will teach you how to tell if you might be coping with your traumatic experience in negative ways. I will describe specific alternatives to help you find positive ways to cope.

## 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.

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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 seven books, each with its own focus on different aspects of trauma 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.

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## Unhelpful Ways of Coping

After a trauma, many people look for ways to feel better. But some of the ways people choose to do this are not helpful and can slow the recovery process. In this book, you will learn about three negative behaviors people use when dealing with a traumatic event. You may be using these negative strategies without even knowing it, so I will teach you how to tell if you might be coping with your traumatic experience in negative ways. I will describe specific alternatives to help you find positive ways to cope.

**Isolation from Others.** People often feel alone with their trauma. Thoughts like "No one can understand what it is like for me" are very common. This can lead survivors to isolate themselves from others, often both emotionally and physically.



Trauma survivors may choose not to reach out to others because they think that others won’t understand, really don’t want to hear about it, or don’t care that much.

Some survivors may be reluctant to be with others because they feel like they should not burden anyone with their problems. Others feel embarrassed, ashamed, or guilty about what happened, and may feel that others will judge them. All of these responses

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are very common for people who have gone through trauma. The reality is that many people want to be supportive. By pulling away from people who can help us, we make things worse. Seeking out someone who can provide comfort, warmth, and caring will help you to feel less lonely and move you forward in your recovery.

Actually, it can be very useful to think that others won't understand you or that you will burden them. When you have these thoughts, try to put yourself in the other person's shoes. What would *you* think about your situation? Would you like to provide help to someone you care about? Would you feel burdened if someone asked you for help? Would you be critical of that person? This exercise will probably make you realize that you should allow others to help you, just as you would want to help them if they were in need.

**Being Around Others.** After a trauma has happened, you may feel like withdrawing from some social situations. You may want to be alone much of the time. This is a natural reaction. But withdrawing too much or for too long isn't helpful. Try to reach out when you can. When you are ready, consider returning to some of your activities and being around other people. This can help you to move forward in your recovery, distract you from your problems, and improve your mood.

**Excessive Anger.** Feeling intense emotion is a very normal response after experiencing a trauma. Anger can be very common and is a normal emotion for trauma survivors. Unfortunately, we can direct this anger in ways that don't help us—by striking out at the world, at ones we love, or at ourselves.



The feeling of anger by itself is not bad or in any way wrong. In fact, it is completely understandable given what has happened. But, if you become angry with the people you care about, then you can become more isolated and feel depressed and lonely. To learn how you are managing your anger, you should try to figure how much anger you are really experiencing. You might jot down answers to the following questions.

### Am I Experiencing Too much Anger?

1. Are you feeling angry a lot of the time?
2. Are you feeling very angry and don't know why?
3. Do you find that you get angry quite often and can't seem to let it go?
4. When you get angry, do you find yourself showing it by yelling, hitting something, or throwing something?
5. When you are angry, do you keep it bottled up inside instead of talking about it?

If you have answered yes to more than two of these questions, you should think about positive ways to manage your anger. Here are some ideas.

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**Be Aware.** Pay careful attention to your anger when it is building. Notice how your muscles are tensing, how your breathing is changing, and how your heart might be racing. Next, rate your level of anger. You can use a simple one to 10 scale, with one meaning very little or no anger and 10 meaning extreme anger. Learn to take these two steps each time your anger begins to build. If you can do these two things before your anger builds, you can then try to distract yourself or find some way to release your anger (e.g., taking a walk) that will help you reduce the tension. Most people say that they can reduce their anger level pretty quickly if they do something physical (like walking or running) or do something distracting (like splashing cold water on their faces or going to get a drink of water).



Next, you should watch for things that “set you off” and trigger your anger. For example, you might become angry when someone doesn’t respond to you the way you wish, or you see someone act in a way toward you or others that really ticks you off. If you can identify those situations, you can interrupt your “anger cycle” before you explode. Once you start to think about what sparks your anger, you may learn that sometimes you get angry at things that aren’t really that big of a deal. But, because of the traumatic experience you have had, you are already primed to become angry since you are dealing with this trauma in addition to everything else in your life.

**Stop and Count to 10.** Another useful skill is to learn the “STOP; COUNT TO 10” method. When you feel you may explode with anger, stop, take a slow, deep breath, and count to 10 under your breath. This will slow down your body’s reaction to your anger and give you a moment to think about what is happening to you.

**Take a Time Out.** If you are becoming extremely angry, you should leave the situation and allow yourself to cool down before returning. This is called the TIME OUT method. Just reducing the tension by leaving the situation can help a lot. Let others know that you might do this as a way to manage your anger, so they don’t think you are just walking out on them.

**Self-Medicating With Alcohol or Drugs.** Trauma hurts. Because it hurts, many trauma survivors will turn to drinking a little more than usual to “take the edge off.” Others will take illegal drugs or medications (without the guidance of a physician) to make themselves feel better or not as bad. This “self-medication” only results in greater problems over time.

Of course, it makes sense to want to feel better as soon as possible after a terrible experience. Using drugs or alcohol might make us feel a little better. Drinking alcohol might seem to make life easier by helping you forget what happened, knocking you out, making you feel stronger, or making you less aware of your feelings. Or, you might drink alcohol or take medication to sleep better if you are having nightmares, bad

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dreams, or if you cannot get to sleep or can't stay asleep all night. Even though this might seem like a good solution, I encourage you to go see a doctor to get a sleep aid that is right for you, rather than just self-medicating.

Self-medication can get in the way of recovery. You can't understand or address the real reasons why you are feeling bad when you self-medicate. In fact, self-medication usually worsens existing problems like depression, excessive anger, or isolation. It also can create new problems, like getting into legal trouble, missing work or family events, or fighting with your loved ones.

**Why are Alcohol and Drugs not Helpful?** First, alcohol can have many negative side effects like midnight awakening, poorer sleep quality, hangovers, and poor impulse control. People who use drugs or alcohol to cope with their trauma will often do things that they didn't intend to do. Second, some people suffer withdrawal effects when they try to stop using drugs or alcohol. This can make it difficult to stop using. If you are using drugs to numb your feelings, remember that they don't go away simply because you make yourself numb. The feelings return as soon as you sober up.



Finally, using drugs or alcohol often makes your relationships more difficult. You may find you are having more arguments with people you care about, and you may even become violent toward them. If you need help sleeping, or feel desperate about how you are feeling, you should seek professional counseling to help you. You might also consider asking your physician for something to help with sleeping. Consult the book *Getting Professional Help: Step by Step* for more information about finding a counselor.

## How Do I know if I'm having a Problem?

Here are some questions to consider:

1. Are you drinking or taking drugs or medications in order to deal with your trauma and its effects?
2. Are you drinking more now than you were before your trauma?
3. Have you been taking lots of over-the-counter medications without talking to your doctor?
4. Are you drinking more than one or two drinks at a time in order to feel the effects?
5. Are you drinking almost every day?
6. Has your drinking or drug use caused problems for you? For example, has it affected your relationships, work, recreation and hobbies? Have you gotten in trouble with the law?
7. Have you tried to slow down or quit and had difficulty doing this?

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8. Have you found yourself blanking out and not knowing what you did when under the influence?
9. Have you ever had an “eye opener” (a drink or use of a drug) in the morning to help take the edge off?
10. Have friends or loved ones commented about your use because they were concerned?

If you have answered yes to any of these questions, this might be a sign that you are self-medicating. It is important for your trauma recovery to limit your drinking and/or stop using drugs or any medications that are not prescribed by your doctor. The other books in this series can help you to find healthier ways to manage your trauma recovery.

