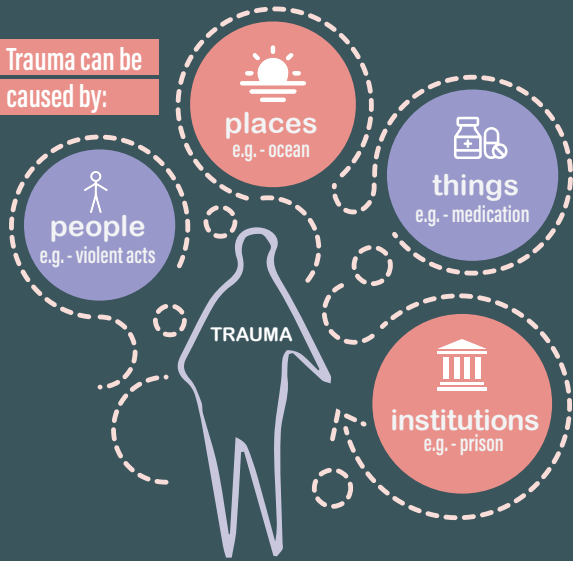


# UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

The following includes information on trauma and tools for addressing feelings of distress related to trauma.

Trauma can be caused by:



## WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma is a **person's response to something (an experience, a sensation, an event) that they find distressing, disturbing, or life-threatening.** Unfortunately, trauma is very common and can be experienced by anyone, including children.

Trauma can look like:

- A person survives a car accident and becomes scared to drive.
- While attending a game, someone is struck during a drive-by and the park cancels the rest of the season.
- A transwoman is called names at a concert and starts having panic attacks in crowds.
- A kid is bullied and ditches school to avoid their bully.

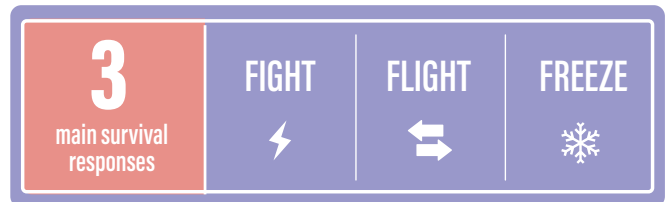
## THE IMPACTS OF TRAUMA

Everyone responds to trauma differently and our reactions are often outside of our control. When we sense a threat, our brains are designed to keep us alive with three main survival responses: fight, flight, or freeze.

These are built in, wired, biological responses that prioritizes our body's ability to adapt and face whatever threat we are faced with.

For example, if we see a bear, what is important to our body is our ability to run away from the bear, not think about what species of bear it is.

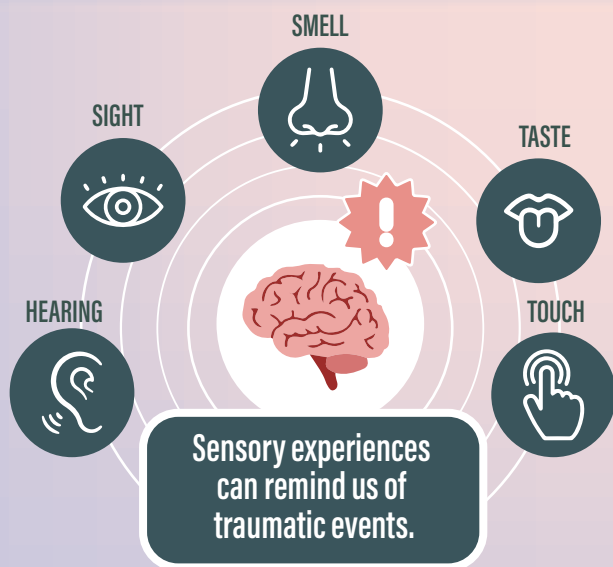
A lot of survivors of trauma blame themselves or feel judged by others for the way they responded to the traumatic event. It is important to understand: *you did what you had to do to survive and what happened is not your fault.*



## SIGNS OF TRAUMA

Sometimes, a sound, smell, or feeling can trick our body into thinking we are back in a moment of danger, even if that moment happened many years ago. We call these triggers or stressors. Stressors are a sensory experience that reminds us of the traumatic event. Stressors can activate our survival responses even if we aren't currently in danger.

People's reactions to a trauma event can vary considerably, so each of the stressors that show up in our thoughts, bodies, and behaviors can look different. All responses to trauma are valid! Sometimes there are different immediate and delayed effects that can show up in our thoughts, bodies, or behaviors.



Below are examples of triggers or stressors that some might experience, or might notice a loved one is experiencing, after a traumatic event.

## I feel...

- Numbness and detachment
- Anxiety or severe fear
- Guilt or shame
- Sadness/depression
- Helplessness/denial
- Range in emotions
- Hypersensitive
- Fearful of crowds/fearful of being alone
- Self-conscious/suicidal ideation
- Apathy/stressed out

## My body experiences...

- Insomnia
- Sweating or shivering
- Loss of or increase in appetite
- Physical sensitivity
- Not wanting to be touched
- Increased heartbeat, and blood pressure
- Frequent illness
- Rashes
- Nausea
- Body pains/muscle aches
- Extreme fatigue or exhaustion
- Nightmares

## I behave by...

- Isolating
- Difficulty concentrating
- Avoiding certain locations, crowds, or activities
- Sudden outburst of anger or rage
- Being easily startled
- Change in appearance
- Trust issues
- Less interest or participation in everyday activities
- Sabotaging relationships
- Risky behaviors
- Increased alcohol and drug use

Trauma is messy! You might notice that some reactions are contradictory. This is because people can have very opposite responses to the same traumatic experience.

## CALMING TECHNIQUES

When we become triggered, it is important to bring ourselves back into the present so that we can remember that we are safe and not back in the past. This is where grounding techniques can come in handy. They can be used on anyone who is feeling triggered, including yourself!

*Grounding exercises are short activities that can help us manage disturbing or upsetting thoughts when we are reminded of our traumatic experience. Below are different grounding techniques:*



Drink a glass of water



**4-7-8 breathing:**

Breathe in for 4 seconds. Hold the breath for 7 seconds. Exhale for 8 seconds. Repeat.



**Five-finger breathing:**

Hold one hand in front of you, with your fingers spread out. Trace the outside of your entire hand with the index finger on your other hand, taking your time, and breathing in when you trace up a finger, then out when you trace down.



**Count backward by 3:**

Slow your racing thoughts by counting backwards by three in your mind from 100 (100, 97, 94, etc).



**5-4-3-2-1 Grounding Technique:**

Notice 5 things you can see, 4 things that you can touch, 3 things that you can hear, 2 things that you can smell, and 1 thing that you can taste.



**Engage in a creative practice:**

Write in a journal, play with clay, paint, collage. What you make doesn't have to be good! Just enjoy the process.