

STABILIZATION STRATEGIES

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Preface: *If you have survived a traumatic experience, you may be feeling overwhelmed by the many normal trauma response symptoms you are experiencing. Trauma affects us on many levels: emotional, physical, cognitive, social, and behavioural. As your body and mind try to integrate the traumatic experience here are some strategies that you might find helpful. You will need to experiment to figure out which ones work best for you.*

Address Sleep Disturbance

Sleep deprivation, all by itself, is associated with an increased stress response. If you are having difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep for several nights in a row, this should be addressed immediately. Relaxation and breathing strategies, counselling, and/or medical intervention may help.

5x* Critiquing Rule (*Choose any number that works for you)

Reviewing a traumatic incident in your mind to try to understand why something happened is a normal response. As human beings we tend to want to make sense of the world around us, our experiences, and our responses to those experiences. This 'critiquing' can however, become maladaptive if it goes on for days and weeks at a time. There comes a time when we need to accept that we may *never* understand why some things happen. The *whys* and *what ifs* can become an endless pursuit and waste of energy. Thus, it may be helpful to set a limit as to the number of times you will allow yourself to critique the experience. While you may decide to do things differently in the future, remember that in the original situation, your response made the most sense to you at the time.

Scheduled Grieving

Trauma often involves a loss of some sort, and as a result, grieving is frequently part of the healing process. Grieving a loss may involve a variety of reactions and feelings (e.g., numbness, denial, fear, anger, sadness, acceptance). These feelings might seem to come out of nowhere, or they may be linked with obvious 'triggers'. In order to regain a sense of control in dealing with your grief, and to reduce the number of grief 'eruptions' you experience in your day, you might try scheduling your grief - 20 minutes a day on a daily basis. At the appointed time, find a private space where you will not be interrupted. Then allow yourself to experience your grief in whatever form it takes. When the allotted time frame is finished, get up, splash some water on your face, get a drink of water and move on to something else. If grief arises outside this scheduled time, remind yourself that you have scheduled time to grieve and it will have its time. Then try to refocus on the moment and the task at hand.

Grounding Object

Some people find that objects which remind them of people who love them can be a source of strength during this challenging time. If there is a particular piece of jewelry, a small object, or a picture that would serve this purpose for you, you may want to keep it nearby or on your person.

Then in moments when you find yourself feeling overwhelmed, frightened, sad or frustrated, being able to touch and/or see this object may offer you additional strength.

In the Moment Strategies

Using your senses to attend to things in the present moment can help to ground or centre you, especially in moments when you are feeling buffeted by images, thoughts, or feelings associated with the trauma. When you consciously choose to pay attention to colour, textures, sounds, taste, temperature, smells, etc. *in the present moment*, you take back control, and can use this as a means to shut off trauma memories.

Transforming physical energy

We know that physical activity is a vital component in building and maintaining a healthy body. Did you know it can also be an important means of releasing stress and emotions that may be stored in your muscles? Consciously drawing on the energy of intense emotion (e.g., anger, anxiety, frustration, stress) during physical exercise is a means to transform that potentially destructive energy into strength. So when you are engaged in exercise, focus on the emotion you wish to release and your movement may help to let go of some of it.

Breathing Exercises

This can be done just about anywhere and only takes a minute or two. Concentrating on your breath and noticing it as you inhale and exhale for just a minute, can help to normalize your breathing and ground you. Another breathing exercise that may help you to get grounded involves focusing on your breathing and trying to notice the moment within each breath when inhalation changes to exhalation.

Relaxation Exercises

Practicing relaxation exercises on a regular basis will provide you with practice at transforming tension within your muscles, into relaxation. Continuing to practice this during times of low stress will make the state of relaxation more readily available to you during times of heightened stress.

Cognitive Script Changes

This strategy will take more work but will be worth it. Most of us are only vaguely aware of the types of things we say to ourselves on a daily basis. There is a 'script' that plays in our thoughts throughout the days – a commentary on life, ourselves, our experiences, and other people. For the most part, this script was never 'intentionally written', but rather is a compilation of our observations from life experience, as well as what we may've learned from important people in our lives. This script has a large impact on our perceptions and feelings. Unfortunately, for many people this script is negative and very self-critical – and consequently is a source of tremendous internal stress. Listening to your script, evaluating the supportiveness of the messages, and adjusting them where needed, can have a major impact on how you feel about yourself and life. If you're not sure how to begin with this, a counsellor can help you.

Asking more Adaptive Questions

When stressful situations arise, what kind of questions do you ask yourself? Are they adaptive and supportive? Think about a moment in which you may have been tired and feeling

overwhelmed by school, work, family issues and/or personal responsibilities. What questions do you then ask yourself in these situations? If your focus is on the *Whys*, *What Ifs*, and questions with predominantly negative outcomes (e.g., “What’s wrong with me?”, “How come I always mess up?”), then you may be escalating your own stress.

If you, however, use more positively focused questions such as: “*What is my priority for this moment?; How can I get some help with this?; or “What can I do in a healthy way to take the edge off of my stress?”* – you are more likely to come up with productive answers that focus on things within your control. Asking yourself these more positively focused questions throughout the day, and following through with your answers won’t necessarily erase your stress, but it can help you to cope more effectively.

Closing the Lens or “Photo Album”

If there are distressing visual images that bother you after a traumatic event, give yourself permission to close the lens or photo album in your mind and let it go. You have a right and a need not to live in a traumatic moment any longer than it lasts. Remind yourself that it is over and you have survived. By being able to close the lens or photo album you take back some control over the trauma.

Journaling or Other Creative Expression

Journaling about your experience may be a way of releasing emotion and organizing your thoughts following a trauma. Drawing, writing poetry or a song, and painting are some of the many creative ways that people have found to give voice to their experiences, and thereby let go of part of the pain.

Accessing Peer, Friend, Family, Professional Supports

We all need support from caring, empathic, non-judgmental others in order to maintain our well-being. Talk with trusted individuals about how you are feeling, what your concerns are, and what kind of support you need. If you are going through a period of difficulty, get professional help – there is no need for you to do it on your own. All of us in this life are at times the helper, and other times the one who needs help – and sometimes we are *both* at the same time. This is a natural part of the human condition.

Alternative Therapies

Some people benefit from alternative therapies such as registered massage therapy, acupuncture, chiropractic care, etc. and make it a regular part of their schedule to deal with stress and/or physical health issues. If these work for you, make time for them in your daily living.

And Finally...

Remember that your symptoms are normal given what you have been through. Following a traumatic incident symptoms typically arise within an hour to a few days, peak within a week or two and then are gone within 4 weeks. At any time during this period, if you need additional support, contact a counsellor. Also if symptoms don’t begin to subside within 3-4 weeks, you will need to see a counsellor and/or medical doctor. Don’t delay on taking care of you!