Tools for managing traumatic stress

By Adena Bank Lees

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other forms of traumatic stress can make life incredibly difficult and unpredictable. Staying away from the people, places and situations that trigger these thoughts and memories can be appropriate and helpful at times. However, using avoidance as your only strategy can cause more problems than it attempts to solve.

Rather, it’s better to have an abundance of tools at the ready for when you’re feeling the scary reach of traumatic stress. You have a right to feel calm and in the present moment. Practising these tools is a good first step to managing your traumatic stress and getting on the road to recovery.

**Breathe slowly and deeply**
This is a free and portable tool to use at any time and anywhere. Make sure you inhale through your nose and exhale for longer than you inhale, either through your nose or through pursed lips. A suggested rhythm is to inhale for four counts, hold for two and exhale for six to eight counts. By doing this, you are activating the part of your nervous system that helps your body calm itself. This can help you to think clearly and return to the present moment.

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**At a glance**

1. Stay calm
2. Think clearly
3. How you feel is not your fault
4. Bring to mind something positive
5. Laughter is proven to reduce stress
Validate your experience
What you have experienced is real and hurtful. Having the name or context of traumatic stress/PTSD lets you know that how you feel is not your fault. There is nothing “wrong” with you. What you’re going through is actually a normal response to abnormal experiences. It’s important to remind yourself of this as you go through challenging symptoms, because self-validation is an important piece of healing.

Focus on your five senses (5-4-3-2-1)
Start with five different that things you see (the trees outside the window), hear (the humming of the fridge), sense with your skin (my collar on my neck or a warm breeze on my arms), taste (the lingering aftertaste of coffee on my tongue), and smell (stale air or perfume). Then notice four of each, then three of each, and so on. Be as specific about these items as you can to make you really concentrate on external factors and to get out of your head. Pay attention to things such as shape, scent, texture and colour. You will probably be back to the present moment before you even realise it.

Think positively for 12 seconds
Bring to mind something positive – such as a beautiful flower, a sunset, a smile on someone’s face or a compliment from a friend or colleague. And really focus on it for 12 seconds. Breathe and notice its impact on your body and emotions. According to neuropsychologist Dr. Rick Hanson, it only takes 12 seconds for the creation of new neuron connections. These positive experiences have the ability to replace stress/fear-based thinking and coping.

Use a gravity or weighted blanket
A symptom of PTSD is sleep disturbances (which includes insomnia), nightmares, flashbacks and high anxiety. Not getting enough of the type of sleep that you need can cause you to have problems concentrating, leading to difficulties at work or school. It can lead to irritability – negatively impacting important relationships. There is research to show that using a weighted blanket, which simulates being held or hugged safely and firmly, can assist in reducing anxiety and insomnia.

Laugh
According to recent research, laughter really is medicine, and is now being used more commonly as a therapeutic method. It is proven to reduce stress by releasing specific hormones that boost your immune system and rewire your brain. So have a go-to funny video to watch when you’re feeling stressed or anxious. Or spend time with a friend or loved one with whom you feel safe and who can make you laugh.

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