

SUPPORTING SOMEONE WITH TRAUMA

Part of the
Trauma Recovery Starter Kit

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Introduction

If someone you care about is recovering from trauma, you may be wondering how best to support them. If so, they are very lucky to have you in their life. Having the support of the people who care about us is hugely valuable and often plays a big role in a person's recovery.

At the same time, I know that partners, friends and relatives often find it hard to know what to do, especially if they have not been through something similar themselves or been told about trauma. I hope this short guide helps. Every person is different, so the most important thing you can do is to ask the person what they need and how they would like you to support them when they are struggling. In this guide I've included some general ideas to get you started.

I'm Dr Rachel Lee. I'm a consultant clinical psychologist and a trauma specialist. I've been helping people overcome difficult thoughts, feelings and memories for over 25 years. I worked in the NHS for 20 years and I now have a private practice where I offer evidence-based trauma focused therapy like EMDR, supervise over 15 therapists, and provide trauma-informed training and consultancy into organisations.

I hope you find this guide helpful.

Best wishes,

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“After trauma the world is experienced with a different nervous system that has an altered perception of risk and safety.”

Bessel van der Kolk
in *The Body Keeps the Score*
(2014)

What is trauma?

Most people think trauma is defined by the event, and assume that the event has to be something “big” or life-threatening, like a serious car accident, an assault, or a natural disaster. These events can certainly cause post-traumatic stress. But trauma is not limited to events like these, and it’s important to remember that not everyone who goes through events like these develops trauma symptoms or post-traumatic stress.

I see trauma as the impact of an experience, not the experience itself. It refers to the effect of an experience (or series of experiences) on your sense of who you are, the way you experience and view the world, your thoughts, emotions, behaviours, and your nervous system. You can’t tell whether someone has trauma by looking at what happened to them. Instead, trauma is defined by the ongoing psychological and physiological impact of what happened.

If you had a distressing experience that overwhelmed your ability to cope, or that left you feeling unsafe or alone, and that you re-experience in flashbacks, disturbing dreams or intrusive memories, that affects how you feel, think, act, sleep, or relate to others, you may be experiencing trauma. Even if you believe what happened to you “wasn’t that bad.”

In my clinical practice, I have helped people recover from trauma caused by a whole range of experiences, including bullying, workplace harassment, witnessing an accident, complex pregnancies and births, serious injuries, medical procedures, intensive care admissions, suicide, traumatic bereavements, childhood abuse and neglect, relationship betrayal, accidents, assaults and natural disasters and more. As you can see, there is a huge variety in the types of events that can lead to trauma.



What are the common trauma symptoms?

Trauma shows up differently in different people; some people feel on edge, panicky and/or anxious, others feel numb, disconnected and far away. Many people feel a mix of both.

Here are a range of experiences that people who are experiencing trauma might notice:

Re-experiencing symptoms: Flashbacks, intrusive memories and/or distressing dreams.

Avoidance: Avoiding reminders of you of what happened. Avoiding thinking or talking about it.

Changes in thinking: Beliefs like “I’m worthless”, “It was my fault”, “I’m not good enough”, “I’m unsafe”.

Hyperarousal: Feeling on edge, being easily startled, higher levels of irritability; trouble sleeping or concentrating.

Changes in mood: Emotions like sadness, anxiety, guilt, shame, and anger. Or emotional numbness.

An altered sense of identity: Feeling like a different person, or like you’ve lost touch with who you were.

Dissociation: Feeling detached from yourself, other people, or reality.

Difficulties regulating emotions: Having emotional reactions to situations that feel amplified and/or are more difficult to cope with.



Why does the person I'm supporting seem different now?

Trauma often changes how the brain and body respond to stress. The nervous system becomes more sensitive to danger. This can leave the person feeling stressed and on edge, finding things more frightening than they used to, struggling to sleep, or finding it harder to trust or to feel safe. They might also feel low, numb, or not quite themselves.

When we feel on edge we tend to be more sensitive to interpersonal stressors. Things that might not have bothered us in the past can create an amplified response. I have noticed this myself when I have been through very stressful periods of my life. We can find ourselves snapping and being irritable when previously we would have managed the situation calmly and with compassion.

I often explain it to my clients using this analogy. When we're living with chronic stress, we're like a pan of milk left simmering on the hob. It barely takes any extra heat for milk that's already simmering to start bubbling, rise up, boil over and make a mess. Whereas milk that's come straight from the fridge is different. It takes a lot more heat, and you have to heat it for much longer, before it gets anywhere near boiling point.

When you're chronically stressed, you're the simmering pan. So it isn't that you're overreacting, or too sensitive, or weak. You were already close to the top before anything else was added, and the smallest thing can tip you over, when a calmer, more rested you would barely have noticed it.

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I often explain to my clients that when we are experiencing chronic stress, it's a bit like being a pan of milk simmering on the hob. You don't need to apply a lot of extra heat for the milk to boil over and make a mess. Whereas if the milk has just come out of the fridge it takes more heat to bring it to boiling point.

These are normal responses to trauma, and they make sense given what the person has been through. It is not something they can simply think their way out of, put behind them, or 'let go'.

Because of this, the person may need to do some things differently to how they did before. They might avoid certain places for a while, need more rest, or want to change some routines. Try to be patient with this. It is part of how they are coping and keeping themselves feeling safe.

What is a flashback and how can I help during a flashback?

During a flashback, the person re-experiences part of the traumatic event. It can feel to them as though it is happening again, right now. They might see images, hear sounds, smell smells, or feel strong feelings in their body.

The most helpful thing is to gently help them to reorient themselves to the present, so that they can notice that they are no longer in that situation and are safer now. You could speak to them in a soft tone, you could remind them where they are and that they are with you (e.g. "You're at home watching TV with me"),

The best time to prepare for how to respond to a flashback is before it happens. When the person feels calm, ask them how they would like you to help if they have a flashback. Some people like to be reminded where they are, some like a hand to hold, and some prefer a little space. Knowing this in advance means you can help in the way that works best for them.

What can I do if they feel overwhelmed?

When someone feels overwhelmed, let them know that you are there and validate how they are feeling (e.g. "I can see that everything feels overwhelming."). You could then ask them what they would like you to do. For example, would they like a hug, or would they prefer some space? Would they like to go for a walk or to sit quietly with you? Would they like you to help them find solutions or work out what to do to feel better?

Offering choices like this can be very helpful because trauma often leaves people feeling out of control. Giving choices, where you can, helps them to regain a sense of having control over things. It's always good to ask what they need, as things that one person finds supportive won't be the same for another person, and what we need can also change from day to day.

What should I do if they have nightmares?

Nightmares and disturbing dreams are common trauma symptoms. If the person has a nightmare, you can gently help them come back to the present. Vivid nightmares are very disorientating, so anything you can do to help the person realise where they are and ground themselves in the present will be helpful. Speaking softly and letting them know that you are with them can be helpful. You might remind them where they are and that the dream is over now. Give them time to wake up fully and to settle. As with flashbacks, it can help to ask beforehand what they would most like you to do to offer support or help.

How can I support them if they are having therapy?

Therapy takes a lot of courage. Trauma therapy can have ups and downs. Some weeks will feel hard and others will feel hopeful. It is normal to sometimes feel worse before feeling better, especially with trauma-focused therapy. It is a bit like running. When you first try to run, it feels hard and you are out of breath, and at the same time it is making you fitter and stronger. So if the person finds it tough at first, gently encourage them to keep going.

After a session, they may feel tired or emotional. It can help to plan some quiet, soothing time afterwards, such as a walk or a healthy meal.

What is the most helpful thing I can do day-to-day?

The best thing you can do is ask the person you care about how they would like you to support them or help them, particularly at difficult times. Different people need different things, and what feels natural to you may not be what they most need. Some people like a cup of tea, a hug, or a walk together. Others prefer some time alone to do something soothing. And some people like people to offer tips and engage in problem solving. The only way to know what will work best for the person you care about is to ask.

Simply letting them know that you care, and that you are there, is hugely valuable. You do not need to try fix anything or to have the right words. Being alongside them and validating how they feel will often be very helpful. A simple sentence like "It makes sense that this is so difficult for you, given what you've been through" or "I can see how overwhelmed you're feeling, you're dealing with such a lot right now." that helps the person feel seen can be very powerful.

If you are ever worried that the person you care about and think that their mental health is deteriorating or that they might be unsafe in some way, please encourage them to speak to their GP. In the UK, you can call the Samaritans free, at any time, on 116 123. In an emergency, call 999.

This guide is part of the free Trauma Recovery Starter Kit. If you or the person you care about would like to take this a step further and learn more about trauma, get some helpful psychological insights and develop skills to cope with common trauma symptoms, you may like to look at the [North Star Trauma Recovery Path](#). The NSTRP is an online step-by-step programme that I created to help people find their path to recovery. Within the Improving Relationships module there is a video that is specifically for partners, friends and relatives. It focuses on the way trauma affects relationships and how to make positive changes.

Disclaimer

This guide is a psychoeducational resource. It is designed to help you understand more about trauma symptoms and how to support the person you care about. It is not therapy or a substitute for professional assessment or treatment. If you find that any of these strategies are unhelpful, please stop using them.

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