



understanding trauma & finding your way through it

What is trauma?

Trauma is what happens when something really tough or overwhelming leaves a lasting impact on how we feel, think, or see the world.

It doesn't look the same for everyone, but many young people experience it- and with the right support, healing and recovery is possible.

Traumatic events and experiences can occur in different ways, including;

- Single incident trauma – a sudden event like a car accident, bushfire, or assault
- Complex trauma – repeated experiences such as bullying, abuse, violence, discrimination, or neglect
- Vicarious trauma – being a witness or bystander to distressing events
- Intergenerational trauma – harm passed down through families and communities, such as experiences of family violence, colonisation, forced removal, racism, and war.

Whatever form it takes, trauma can shape how we feel, relate, and move through the world. Trauma isn't just about what happened but about how it affects you afterwards.



How trauma can be experienced

Everyone experiences trauma differently, but there are some common signs and symptoms.

The impacts of trauma can show up in lots of ways. People who are living with the impacts of trauma may experience:

- Feeling panic, anger, or fear
- Numbness, disconnection, or feeling “outside” your body
- Trouble trusting others or setting boundaries
- Sleep difficulties, nightmares, or flashbacks
- Physical health issues like headaches, inflammation or digestion issues
- Feelings of shame or guilt for things that weren't your fault
- Disconnection from culture, identity, faith, or community

Trauma responses are the brain and body's way of trying to protect itself against overwhelming stress.

Who experiences trauma?

Anyone can be impacted by trauma. By age 16, around two-thirds of young people will have experienced at least one traumatic event. More than 8 out of 10 young people attending headspace centres have experienced some form of childhood trauma.

Some young people may be more affected, not because of who they are, but because of the systems and environments around them. Young people who experience racism, discrimination, homelessness, disability, or disconnection from culture and community may face heavier loads.

Intersectionality helps us understand how parts of our identity, like culture, gender, sexuality, disability, or age, interact. These overlapping identities can both increase exposure to trauma and be powerful sources of strength and connection.

Trauma and PTSD

Trauma is sometimes linked with diagnoses like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD was originally recognised in war veterans but we now know that young people can also experience deep impacts from trauma. In young people, trauma can look like PTSD but it can also look like:

- Ongoing mood difficulties
- Risk-taking behaviour
- Struggles in relationships
- Difficulties with substance use

You don't need a diagnosis to seek care. What matters most is that if you are struggling, you deserve support.



Healing and recovery

Healing doesn't mean forgetting. It means finding your way through, at your own pace.

Healing can happen in lots of ways:

- Small grounding practices – lying in the grass, making music, painting, walking, or mindful breathing
- Connection with others – trusted friends, family, Elders, mentors, or community groups
- Cultural practices – spending time on Country, ceremony, dance, song, storytelling, language
- Spirituality or faith – prayer, meditation, or time in places of worship
- Therapy and professional support – counselling, peer support, or youth services

Self-care basics matter too: sleep, nourishing food, movement, routine, and reflecting on how substances might affect you

Healing can look like:

- Feeling safer in your body and identity
- Reconnecting with culture and community
- Building relationships where you feel seen and valued
- Learning to calm your nervous system
- Building compassion towards yourself

Healing from trauma takes time but recovery is possible.



Facing what feels hard

When living with the impacts of trauma you might feel like avoiding things—like school, work, social events, or even activities you used to enjoy. Avoidance might feel safer, but it can shrink your world over time. Research shows that facing challenges gently, and with support, helps recovery. Start small. Make a list of things you've been avoiding and pick one manageable step. Schools, unis, and workplaces often have staff who can help you create a plan to get back into life. Each step builds strength and confidence.

When it feels too big

Sometimes, the impacts of trauma feel overwhelming. You might feel hopeless, stuck, or even think about harming yourself. You don't need to wait until things feel really bad to get support but it might be time to seek extra support if you notice:

- Ongoing anxiety, anger, or sadness
- Difficulty at school, work, or in relationships
- Low self-worth or self-neglect
- Risky behaviours or difficulties with substance use
- Flashbacks, nightmares, or dissociation
- Self-harm or suicidal thoughts

One of the bravest things you can do is reach out. You don't need all the words, just "I'm not okay" is enough to start a conversation with a trusted person. Getting help early can make it easier to recover, but it's never too late to reach out.

Identity, culture, and belonging

Trauma can sometimes disconnect us from culture, community, faith, or our sense of self. For some, healing means reconnecting. For others, it's about discovering safety and belonging for the first time.

Healing is deeply tied to identity and culture. Many young people say they began to heal when they could connect with who they truly are in spaces that welcomed all parts of them.

Post-traumatic growth

While trauma is painful, some people also experience post-traumatic growth including new strengths and perspectives that emerge after hardship. Research supports that when people grow through trauma they can develop greater empathy and compassion, stronger connections with others, more appreciation for life, and confidence in their own resilience and capacity.

This doesn't mean the trauma was a good thing or that healing is easy. It does mean growth and transformation are possible.



Your story isn't over

If trauma is part of your story, know this, you are more than what happened to you. Healing takes time. It begins with understanding, grows through connection, and moves at your pace.

Take it step by step and rest when you need. Celebrate the small wins. Reach out when it feels heavy. Healing is possible and you might come through it stronger, kinder, and more connected than before.



If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace, your school, TAFE or university wellbeing service or your local health provider. For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre, or for online and telephone support, visit headspace.org.au

If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.

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