

Trauma, PTSD & the Nervous System

Understanding survival responses, triggers, avoidance, and recovery without blaming yourself for protective reactions.

Trauma reactions are protective survival responses. Skills are meant to increase choice and flexibility, not force you to “calm down” on command.

Trauma responses

After overwhelming or threatening experiences, the nervous system may remain prepared for danger even when the event is over. Reactions can include intrusive memories, nightmares, avoidance, emotional numbing, hypervigilance, startle responses, irritability, guilt, shame, or feeling detached.

Fight, flight, freeze, and shutdown

- Fight: anger, confrontation, tension, or a strong need to regain control.
- Flight: restlessness, overworking, escape, or avoiding reminders.
- Freeze: feeling stuck, blank, indecisive, or unable to act.
- Shutdown/collapse: numbness, fatigue, disconnection, or a sense of being far away.

Grounding before processing

- Orient: name where you are, the date, and what is different from the past event.
- Use the senses: identify five things you can see, four you can feel, three you can hear, two you can smell, and one you can taste.
- Use paced breathing if it feels helpful; for some trauma survivors, movement or external grounding works better than breath-focused exercises.
- Reduce unnecessary trigger exposure when you are overwhelmed, but avoid building a life entirely around avoidance.

Therapy and trauma recovery

Trauma treatment is usually paced. Stabilization, coping, trust, meaning-making, and trauma processing are individualized. You do not need to tell every detail before you are ready.

Try this reflection

When you become triggered, what clues tell you that your nervous system is reacting to the past rather than the present?

Using this resource: For education and skill-building only; not diagnosis, medical advice, or crisis care. If you feel overwhelmed, pause and seek appropriate professional support. In the U.S., call or text 988 for crisis support; call 911 for an immediate emergency.