Common reactions to trauma

The reactions people commonly have after a frightening or overwhelming event.

After something frightening, shocking or overwhelming, most people have strong reactions. They are a normal response to what happened. They do not mean you are weak or going mad.

Memories that push in

Images, sounds or smells that come back uninvited. Nightmares. Feeling as if it is happening again.

Being on guard

Jumpy, easily startled, scanning for danger, unable to relax, poor sleep, short temper.

Avoiding

Staying away from places, people or conversations linked to what happened. Keeping busy so you do not have to think.

Numbness and distance

Feeling flat, cut off from others, unreal, or as if you are watching life from outside.

Strong feelings

Fear, anger, sadness, guilt or shame, sometimes all in one day.

Changes in the body

Tension, headaches, stomach upset, exhaustion, a racing heart.

Changes in thinking

Poor concentration and memory. Blaming yourself. Seeing the world as dangerous or people as untrustworthy.

Changes in what you do

Withdrawing, drinking more, working all hours, losing interest in things.

What usually happens

For most people these reactions ease over the first few weeks, especially with support, rest and a return to routine. Expect good days and bad days along the way.

What helps in the early weeks

- Stay connected with people you trust, even if you do not want to talk about it.
- Keep to ordinary routines: meals, sleep, movement.
- Let yourself feel what you feel, in small doses.
- Go easy on alcohol. It gets in the way of the mind's natural processing.

When to look for more help

If the reactions are still strong after about a month, are getting worse, or are stopping you from living your life, talk to your GP or a therapist. Effective treatments exist.

My notes and questions

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

What is PTSD?

What post-traumatic stress disorder is, why it lasts and how it is treated.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can develop after an event involving serious threat to you or someone else: an accident, an assault, abuse, a sudden death, a traumatic birth or medical event, war, disaster. It is diagnosed when certain reactions last longer than a month and get in the way of life.

The four groups of symptoms

Re-experiencing
Flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive memories that feel as if the event is happening now, with the same fear and body reactions.

Avoidance
Staying away from reminders, and trying not to think or talk about it.

Changes in mood and beliefs
Guilt, shame, numbness, feeling cut off. "It was my fault." "Nowhere is safe." "I am damaged."

Being on high alert
Easily startled, always watchful, irritable, poor sleep and concentration.

Why it lasts

- **The memory is unprocessed.** It is stored in fragments of sight, sound and sensation, without a clear "this is over" tag, so reminders set it off as if it were now.
- **Avoidance stops processing.** Pushing the memory away prevents the mind from filing it as past.
- **The meaning sticks.** Beliefs such as "I should have done something" keep the sense of threat or shame alive.

Treatment

The treatments with the best evidence are trauma-focused: trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy and EMDR (eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing). Both help you revisit the memory safely so it can be stored as something that happened in the past, and both look at what the event has come to mean to you.

This work is done at your pace. We start by building ways to stay steady, and you stay in charge throughout.

Outlook
PTSD can be treated. Most people who complete a trauma-focused therapy improve substantially, including people whose trauma happened many years ago.

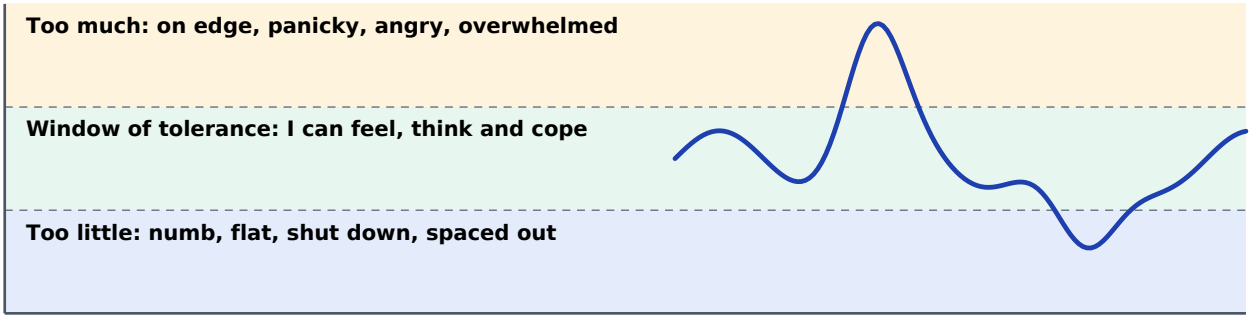
My notes and questions

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

The window of tolerance

What the window of tolerance is, and what happens above and below it.

Everyone has a zone of arousal in which they function well. Inside it you can think clearly, feel your feelings without being swamped, and respond to what is in front of you. This is called the window of tolerance.



Stress pushes us towards the edges. Past the top edge the body goes into fight or flight. Past the bottom edge it shuts down. Both are automatic survival responses that you do not choose.

	Above the window	Below the window
Feels like	Panicky, enraged, overwhelmed, racing	Numb, empty, foggy, far away
Body	Heart pounding, tense, shaky, hot	Heavy, slow, cold, hard to move
Mind	Racing thoughts, cannot think straight	Blank, cannot find words
Helps	Slow out-breath, cold water, grounding, movement to burn it off	Gentle movement, strong tastes or smells, naming what you see, contact with someone

What affects the window

- Trauma, stress, tiredness, hunger and illness all make the window narrower.
- Everyone's window is a different size, and it changes from day to day.
- The window can be widened: through rest and routine, safe relationships, and practising skills that bring you back from the edges.

In therapy

We aim to work inside your window. If you notice yourself heading out of it, say so, and we will pause until you are back.

The window of tolerance was described by Daniel Siegel (1999).

My notes and questions

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

My window of tolerance

Your own signs of being above or below your window, and what brings you back.

Name _____ Date _____

Above my window

How I know I am there (body, thoughts, behaviour)

Inside my window

What I am like when I am steady

Below my window

How I know I am there (body, thoughts, behaviour)

What brings me down from above

Slowing, cooling, grounding

What brings me up from below

Movement, sensation, contact

What makes my window smaller

- [ ] Tiredness
- [ ] Alcohol
- [ ] Conflict
- [ ] Certain dates
- [ ] Pain
- [ ] Hunger

What makes my window bigger

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Grounding with your five senses

The 5-4-3-2-1 exercise, for bringing your attention back to the present.

When anxiety or a memory pulls you out of the present, your senses can bring you back. Go slowly. Say each thing out loud or in your head, and really look, listen and feel.

5 things I can see	Look around. Notice colours, shapes, light and shadow. Pick out small details.
4 things I can feel	Your feet in your shoes. The chair under you. The air on your skin. An object in your hand.
3 things I can hear	Near and far. Traffic, a clock, your own breathing.
2 things I can smell	Coffee, soap, fresh air. If nothing is there, name two smells you like.
1 thing I can taste	A sip of water, a mint, or just the taste in your mouth.

Finish with one slow breath out, and remind yourself where you are: "It is Tuesday afternoon. I am in my kitchen. I am safe right now."

Make it yours

Things I can keep nearby to help me ground (something to hold, smell, taste or look at)

A sentence that reminds me where and when I am

When I tried this, what did I notice?

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

A menu of grounding techniques

Different things work for different people. Try several and keep what helps.

Grounding means anchoring your attention in the here and now. Use it when you feel overwhelmed, spaced out, panicky or caught in a memory. Tick the ones you want to try.

Using your body

- [ ] Press your feet into the floor and notice the pressure
- [ ] Hold something cold, or run cold water over your wrists
- [ ] Stretch, stamp your feet, or push against a wall
- [ ] Clench your fists, then let them go
- [ ] Walk, counting your steps
- [ ] Hold a warm mug in both hands

Using your mind

- [ ] Describe the room in detail, out loud
- [ ] Say the date, the time and where you are
- [ ] Count backwards from 100 in sevens
- [ ] Name an animal for each letter of the alphabet
- [ ] List everything you can see that is blue
- [ ] Read something out loud, slowly

Soothing yourself

- [ ] Say something kind to yourself, as you would to a friend
- [ ] Picture a place where you feel calm and safe
- [ ] Listen to a favourite song
- [ ] Wrap up in a blanket
- [ ] Smell something you love
- [ ] Think of people who care about you

Tips

Practise when you are only a little stressed, so the skills are ready when you need them. Keep your eyes open. Rate your distress from 0 to 10 before and after, to learn which ones work for you.

My top three

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com

This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Coping with flashbacks

What to do during a flashback and afterwards.

A flashback is a memory so vivid it feels as if the trauma is happening again. It is frightening, and it is a memory. It cannot hurt you, and it will pass.

During a flashback

1. **Tell yourself what it is.** "This is a flashback. It is a memory. It is not happening now."
2. **Open your eyes and look around.** Name five things you can see. Say the date and where you are.
3. **Feel your feet on the floor.** Press them down. Feel the chair holding you.
4. **Breathe out slowly.** Longer out than in.
5. **Use your senses.** Hold something cold or textured. Smell something strong. Sip water.
6. **Remind yourself it is over.** "That was then. I survived. I am safe now."

Afterwards

- Give yourself time. You may feel shaky or tired.
- Do something comforting and ordinary: a warm drink, a blanket, a walk.
- If you can, tell someone you trust.
- Note what set it off, when you are ready. Triggers get easier to handle once you know them.

A sentence to finish

"Right now I am feeling (frightened) and my body is (shaking), because I am remembering (what happened). At the same time, I am looking around and I can see (the kitchen, my dog). It is (today's date). So I know that (it) is not happening now."

My grounding kit: things to keep nearby that bring me back (something to hold, smell, taste or look at)

Cut along the dashed lines. Keep a card in your wallet or phone case.

This is a flashback. It is a memory. It is not happening now. Look around. Feet on the floor. Breathe out. It is over. I am safe.

Patrick O'Hare Therapy

What helps me most to come back

Patrick O'Hare Therapy

The sentence to finish is adapted from the flashback halting protocol described by Babette Rothschild.

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

Triggers: then and now

For one trigger, compare what is the same as then with what is different now.

Name _____ Date _____

When something sets off a trauma memory, your brain has spotted a similarity and sounded the alarm. This exercise trains it to notice the differences as well.

What happened just now? What set me off (a sight, sound, smell, feeling, place, date)?

What did it remind me of?

THEN	NOW
What was happening at the time of the trauma? Where was I, how old, who was there, what could I do?	Where am I today? How old am I? Who is here? What can I do now that I could not do then?

Everything that is different between then and now

What I can say to myself the next time this trigger comes up

How I felt before and after doing this

Tip: look around and name five things that prove it is now, not then. Today's date. Your phone. Your own hands.

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

A calm place in your mind

A guided exercise for imagining a calm place in detail.

Your body responds to what you imagine. Picture biting into a lemon and your mouth waters. In the same way, picturing a calm place in detail can settle your body down.

Steps

1. Sit comfortably and take a few slow breaths.
2. Bring to mind a place where you feel calm and at ease. It can be real or made up: a beach, a hillside, a room, a garden. Somewhere with no difficult memories attached.
3. Look around it. What can you see? Colours, light, the time of day?
4. What can you hear? What can you smell? What is the air like on your skin?
5. Notice where you feel the calm in your body. Let it spread.
6. Give the place a name or a cue word.
7. Stay for a few minutes. When you are ready, bring your attention back to the room.

If the image changes or something unwelcome appears, you can alter it, as you would edit a film. It is your place. If no place feels safe, try imagining a calm activity or a kind presence instead.

What I can see

What I can hear

What I can smell and feel

Where I feel calm in my body

My cue word or name for this place

When could I use this? What did I notice when I practised?

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.

What keeps me steady

Your warning signs, and the grounding, people and places that help you stay steady.

Name _____ Date _____

Signs that I am becoming overwhelmed or starting to shut down

Grounding that works for me

Senses, movement, orienting

Soothing that works for me

Comfort, warmth, kindness

People I can be with or contact

Places where I feel calm

Things to avoid when I am struggling (they seem to help and do not)

Words I want to hear from myself

What I will do after a difficult session or a hard day

© 2026 Patrick O'Hare Therapy · patrickoharetherapy.com
This handout supports your therapy. It does not replace professional advice.