



Coping with Trauma: How Partners and Caregivers Can Help

This handout contains information meant to help partners and caregivers better understand and support their loved ones who are experiencing psychological trauma. You may also refer to our brochure titled *Psychological Trauma in Adults*, which contains specific details on psychological trauma.

What is Psychological Trauma?

Psychological trauma, also known as traumatic stress, can occur following a threatening event. A threatening event can be any distressing, dangerous, or scary experience, often resulting in fear, horror or helplessness that may feel uncontrollable or difficult to manage.

Psychological trauma is not just about what happened during the threatening event; it is also about *how* the event has impacted your loved one emotionally and mentally. Your loved one may find it hard to cope with their thoughts, feelings, and bodily reactions after a traumatic event. You may also observe changes in their behaviours at home, work, or when interacting with others. Increased misunderstandings, conflicts, and emotional disconnection may sometimes occur as well. Please refer to the brochure titled *Psychological Trauma in Adults* for more specific information on traumatic stress symptoms.





■ Is it normal to experience traumatic stress reactions?



It is normal to experience traumatic stress reactions after a frightening experience, as one's body and mind will typically go through a period of adjustment. Different people can react to the same traumatic event in different ways. Some show traumatic stress reactions immediately after the event, while others may respond in a delayed manner such as weeks or months later.

■ How can you support a loved one with psychological trauma?

A. Learn more about psychological trauma. To cope with the effects of psychological trauma, you can first learn more about the symptoms, and the impact of traumatic stress on the way your loved one manages day-to-day events and stressors, and interacts with other people around them. As traumatic stress reactions can sometimes be challenging to manage, learning more about it can increase empathy and compassion toward your loved one.

B. Identify trauma reminders. You may start to observe that some situations, people, places, or things can lead to quick changes in your loved one's mood or behaviours. Specific dates or anniversaries may also be associated with the traumatic experience, causing your loved one distress as the dates draw closer. These are known as trauma reminders. As you better understand their trauma reminders, you can prepare them to better cope with their reactions to these reminders (refer to point 'C' on the next page).






C. Support them in coping with distress. There are two effective strategies commonly used to manage the immediate effects of traumatic stress symptoms in response to trauma triggers. First ensure that they are in a quieter place before asking them to **(i)** practise deep breathing by breathing in and out deeply and slowly for at least 20 counts, preferably through the diaphragm, and/or **(ii)** connect with their five senses using the 5-4-3-2-1 method*. You may also encourage them to use any existing adaptive coping strategy that is helpful, or try new ones listed in the brochure *Psychological Trauma in Adults*. If your loved one is seeing a therapist, you may find out from the therapist about other strategies that may be helpful. This can show your loved one that you are willing to understand and support them in their recovery process.

D. Allow for “down days”. There will inevitably be ups and downs as you support your loved one in recovering from psychological trauma. It may help to accept that there will likely be ‘down days’, when your loved one may feel more emotionally sensitive, irritable, or be triggered by unexpected trauma reminders that day. It may also help both your loved one and yourself if you discuss with them beforehand on how they would like to be supported during such days.

*The 5-4-3-2-1 method involves identifying 5 things we can see, 4 things we can feel (texture), 3 things we can hear, 2 things we can smell, and 1 thing we can taste in the current environment we are in.





E. Recognise and keep to your own boundaries. It is important to also be mindful of how your loved one's reactions to trauma reminders can affect your own feelings and behaviours, even if you have not had a traumatic experience before. You can discuss with them some ways in which you can still feel safe while supporting them with their trauma reactions. For instance, planning for moments where you need to step away for a breather when necessary. As their support figure, you can continue to understand and acknowledge your loved ones' experiences without accepting acts of verbal threats, aggression, or violence, or feeling responsible for their behaviours. Setting clear boundaries like this allows you to provide them with physical and emotional support sustainably.

F. Practise good self-care. Ensuring that you get sufficient sleep and regular meals are effective ways to be physically and emotionally recharged. Where possible, schedule periods of rest, physical activity, or personal time to yourself in your day. Listening to your own needs and reaching out to those you trust can also ensure that you receive the support you need.





Can your loved ones recover from psychological trauma?

As a partner or caregiver, your support can often be a source of strength for your loved ones healing from psychological trauma. You can contribute to your loved one's recovery by providing consistent support using the abovementioned strategies.

Recovering from psychological trauma will take time, and the length of recovery varies across individuals. Most people can naturally recover when their environment or circumstances stabilise, when they practise coping strategies, and receive social support from others. Some may benefit from working with trained professionals who can assist them in their recovery.

When and where can your loved ones seek professional support from?

If your loved one is not currently receiving professional support, and is still experiencing traumatic stress symptoms more than **one month** after the traumatic event, consider speaking with a polyclinic doctor or general practitioner (GP) for a referral to a psychiatrist and/or psychologist in restructured hospitals. You may also consider seeking out private psychiatrists or psychologists, without needing a referral.

If your loved one is currently seeing a psychiatrist or medical doctor at KKH, they can refer you to the **KKH Psychosocial Trauma Support Service (PTSS)**. PTSS consists of a team of clinical psychologists who specialises in providing psychological trauma assessment and interventions for women and children. These forms of support can help them to better cope with the after-effects of traumatic experiences.