

# TRAUMA, GRIEF & THE BRAIN



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Grief can feel even more complex when it is experienced alongside trauma. Using strategies that connect us with our body and help us make sense of our memories can support safety, calm and carrying grief forward.

## HOW OUR BRAIN RESPONDS TO FEELING UNSAFE

As humans, we feel safest when life is predictable and we have some choice and control. When something threatens our sense of safety, our brains and bodies respond quickly, sometimes automatically.

Trauma is an emotional response to extremely distressing experiences that overwhelm our ability to cope.

This can come from:

- A single overwhelming event
- Or repeated smaller experiences over time

Everyone experiences and processes trauma differently. Even people who go through the same situation can feel it in different ways.

## THE BRAIN'S RESPONSE TO TRAUMA

When a traumatic event happens, the brain receives a clear message: "I'm not safe."

This can trigger the parasympathetic nervous system, which prepares the body for danger. It affects:

- Breathing
- Sleep
- Hunger and thirst
- The ability to think clearly and logically

Instead of the logical brain leading, other survival-based areas take over to help keep us safe.

## WHAT HELPS THE BRAIN FEEL SAFE IN THE BODY

These strategies support physical safety and calm the nervous system.

- Grounding techniques (body awareness, five senses awareness & progressive muscle relaxation)
- Slow and deep belly breathing. This regulates the nervous system and signals safety to the brain
- Gentle movement (e.g. walking, stretching)
- Looking after our physical needs with food, water and sleep
- A predictable routine helps the brain regain a sense of control and safety
- Mindful moments. Being present, when it feels safe to do so

## WHEN TRAUMA & GRIEF OVERLAP

If a child or adult experiences trauma during or around the time of their Important Person's death, this adds an extra layer to grief. It can feel like the brain gets stuck in the most painful or frightening memories.

The body releases stress hormones and neurochemicals to protect us. These chemicals also change the brain:

- Some parts of the brain shrink or become underactive
- Other parts, like those that detect threat, become overactive

These brain changes are real. They affect how we think, feel and respond.

## COMMON REACTIONS PEOPLE MIGHT EXPERIENCE AFTER TRAUMA & GRIEF

- Feeling jumpy or easily startled
- Trouble concentrating or making decisions
- Short-term memory difficulties
- Less trust in themselves
- Vivid flashbacks
- Feeling numb or emotionally detached
- Strong reactions to crowds, loud noises or busy environments
- Lowered immune system and getting sick more often
- Racing thoughts or a racing heart
- Intense fatigue and difficulty sleeping
- Less interest in the world around them

*These are normal responses to situations that turn our world upside down.*

## WHAT HELPS THE BRAIN PROCESS & CONNECT

These strategies support emotional regulation, making sense of memories and social connection.

- Visualisation (imagining safe places or putting upsetting memories in a lockable box)
- Journaling or creative expression
- Self-kindness (lowering expectations)
- Community and connection (co-regulation and relational safety are key)
- Telling your story in a safe and caring spaces