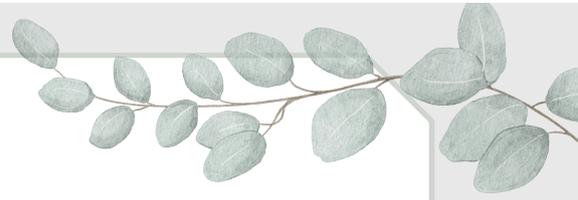




THE
BARNABAS
CENTER

Toolkit

Resources, Tools and Support for your Personal Journey



Counseling Toolkit

October/November 2025

Understanding Trauma

What is Trauma and How do we Heal from it?

Trauma is a state of fright that we experience when we encounter a sudden, unexpected, and even life-threatening event over which we don't have control and we're not able to respond effectively in the moment. This can be a sudden death, car accident, or natural disaster.

Trauma can also include adverse life events that seem less significant at first glance, like divorce, bullying, or getting news about a terminal illness. Psychotherapist Resmaa Menakem summarizes trauma this way: *"Trauma can be anything that happens too much, too soon, or too long coupled with not enough of what should have happened."*

We all process experiences differently, and not everyone has the same reaction to any event; what one person experiences as trauma may not cause distress for another. Oftentimes, after a traumatic experience, we will replay the event in our mind over and over and continually think about what happened. These adverse experiences will stick with us—whether we give attention to them or not—and can lead to significant impairments in our lives. Upwards of 70% of adults have had at least one traumatic experience, but the good news is that when you understand how trauma impacts the brain these symptoms can often be reversed and you can heal.

What is a Trauma Response?

When you experience something threatening or dangerous or just witness something happening to someone else, your brain activates the fight/flight/freeze response (FFF) — essentially the survival mode —

in the reptile part of your brain.

This response helps keep you safe. It shuts down thinking, it releases a surge of hormones, cortisol and adrenaline, and it sends blood to your big muscles so you can fight or run away. Your heart starts pounding and your breath speeds up so that you're prepared to take physical action to stay safe. And then after the threat has passed, your nervous system should go back into restorative mode, or the rest-and-digest mode.

But when we experience trauma, something interferes with your ability to feel safe. Your brain and your body stay stuck in this FFF mode, so even when you're safe, your brain and your body stay tense. They are on high alert and you don't revert to rest and digest.

When we are trapped in a constant trauma response, we may experience difficult symptoms. These include:

- Painful thoughts (upsetting memories, flashbacks, and memory loss)
- Intense emotions (feeling helpless, anxious, ashamed, scared, jumpy, angry, feeling blame or persistent negativity, or just feeling numb)
- Bodily changes (increased heart rate, feeling jittery or on edge, startling easily, unexpected rage or tears, short and shallow breathing, panic attacks, insomnia, or nightmares)
- Behavioral changes (avoidance of anything related to the trauma or its memories)

These symptoms show up because after experiencing trauma, your brain changes on a physical level. Your brain is adapting to the experience that the world isn't safe, so it takes measures to help you avoid future dangers. So essentially your brain makes you more danger-avoidant. However, our brain isn't hard-wired; it is super moldable, and it rewires depending on what we experience and how we use it. Below are 4 ways that the brain changes or adapts after that experience.

How does Trauma and PTSD Change Your Brain?

1. The Amygdala

The Amygdala is an area of the brain that scans for threats, and it connects memories and emotions. It's like the smoke alarm of the brain. And after trauma the amygdala becomes much more active. It becomes much more sensitive and more likely to alert, to turn on that alarm when it perceives a threat.

Trauma survivors become less tolerant of stress, and little things make them feel more anxious. Common things like loud noises, people entering a room from behind, or seeing someone who reminds them of an aggressor, these can all trigger that threat response. These things are actually safe, but the amygdala associates them with trauma and then sets off that red alert. With PTSD the amygdala becomes more sensitive.

2. The Hippocampus

The Hippocampus is the part of the brain that processes emotions and memories. Brain scans indicate that after trauma, the hippocampus shrinks. After trauma, stress hormones essentially kill off cells in the hippocampus, making it less effective at processing emotions.

This also makes it hard for the brain to distinguish between the past and the present. This is essentially what a flashback is — it's your brain experiencing a memory that feels like it's happening right now.

People who have experienced trauma may have missing memories, fragmented memories, or painful memories that pop up when they don't want them. And when these memories pop up, they re-trigger the amygdala.

Essentially the amygdala perceives the memories as a new threat and sends off that alarm. That restarts the trauma cycle, the flooding of the FFF response, and all those physical changes and stress hormones.

These changes to the hippocampus can also contribute to short-term memory loss. But the connection between the hippocampus and the amygdala gets stronger as if they like talking to each other a lot more now. And this essentially maintains that fear response over time. Even if you can't remember the traumatic event, your smoke alarm is still going to blare with the slightest trigger.

3. The Prefrontal Cortex

The Prefrontal Cortex also shrinks. This is the part of the brain that handles higher-order thinking and planning, rational thought, and language. This part of the brain becomes disrupted by constantly reverting back to that FFF response/ reptile part of the brain.

When you're stuck in FFF or hypervigilance, the thinking part of the brain gets turned down. This affects neuroplasticity, how pathways get laid down in the brain. The more we use certain pathways, the stronger they grow, and the less we use a part of the brain those pathways get trimmed.

When we can't use reason to think through our traumatic memories or sensations, it makes it hard for us to override that danger signal that the amygdala and hippocampus are sending and to remind ourselves that the danger is not real.

Because the prefrontal cortex has shrunk, it's difficult to process through those memories, speak about what happened, and think clearly and rationally. So you can see how a person can get trapped in a loop of trauma if they don't get treatment. These symptoms just make it harder and harder to escape the cycle of PTSD.

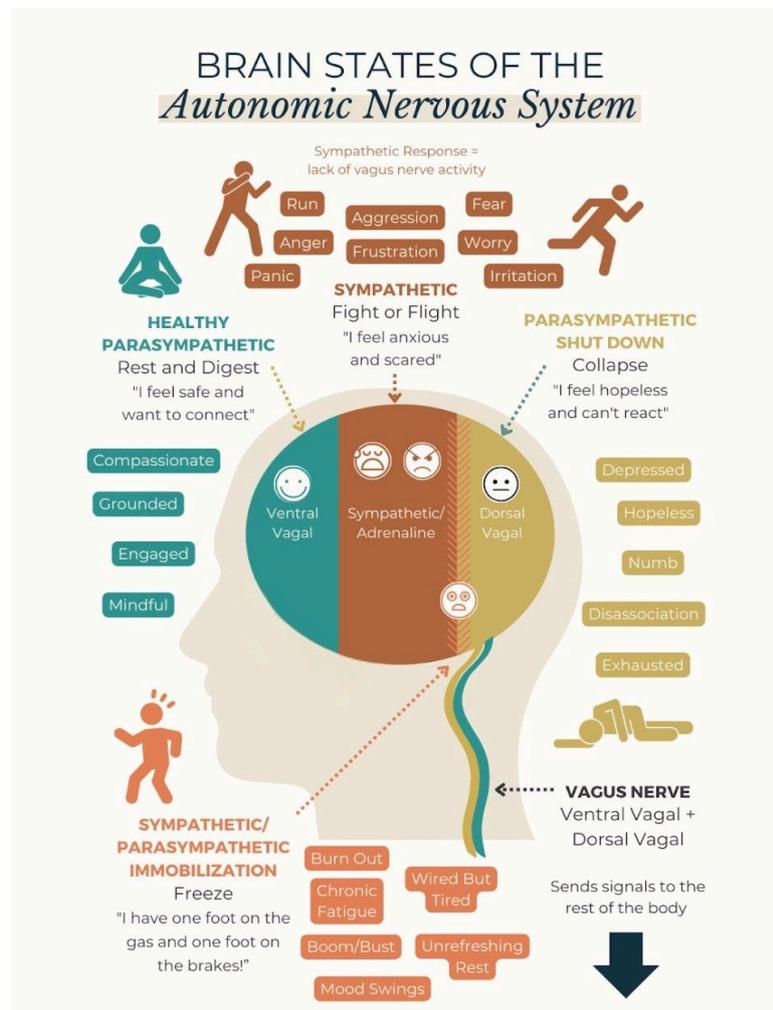
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4. The Nervous System after PTSD

The last way your brain is impacted is through the broader nervous system. This constant flooding with stress hormones keeps the body locked in an activated sympathetic state or the FFF state. It's also known as hyperarousal.

So you feel constantly on edge, you feel jittery, you feel stressed out – until you get exhausted. Then you have adrenal fatigue, right? You shut down and you feel depressed.

Being stuck in this state of an overactive dysregulated nervous system leads to a lot of strain on the body, and that can contribute to chronic illnesses like autoimmune disorders, low functioning of the immune system, diabetes, obesity, muscle tension, chronic pain, and problems with sleep, gut, and heart health.



Healing and Hope from Trauma

The cycle of trauma sounds impossible to overcome! Trauma impacts our brains significantly, but just as your brain changes in response to trauma, it can heal from it too.

Your brain adapted the trauma response as a functional way to deal with real threats and dangers. But your brain is not out to get you because you have a built-in ability to change in response to perceived safety.

Your amygdala can learn to relax. The hippocampus can relearn how to process emotions. And your nervous system can strengthen its ability to revert back to that parasympathetic or rest-and-digest response. Counseling helps to target these structures in the brain and in the body through cognitive work, body-based work, and trauma therapy like EMDR.

Cognitive work targets negative and distorted thoughts related to trauma like self-blame, extreme thinking, and future worry. Additionally, mindfulness, yoga, and writing exercises are great ways to calm the body

and engage your mind in restorative ways. Something as simple as writing can help rewire your brain from trauma by giving you an emotional release and increase your self-awareness. Mindfulness practices like meditation, breathing, and relaxation exercises help reduce rumination and enhance self-acceptance and resilience. Research using MRI scans of the brain shows that mindfulness practice is correlated with growth in the hippocampus and shrinking of the amygdala. So essentially it reverses the effects of trauma.

EMDR or Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing is one of the most effective treatment modalities to help you heal from any traumatic event. Engaging the brain's natural adaptive information processing system, clients recall distressing memories while engaging in bilateral stimulation with eye movements, allowing the brain to reprocess and integrate stuck traumatic memories, reducing their emotional charge and resulting in emotional healing and resolution. The goal is to change how these memories are stored so you no longer feel traumatized in the present and can replace negative self-beliefs with healthy positive statements, like "I am safe now."

Psalm 34:18 reminds us: *"The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."* In times of trauma, God invites us to bring our pain to Him. Healing may come through prayer, community, therapy, and time — but it always starts with knowing we are not alone. We hope you will reach out to us at The Barnabas Center to learn more about how you can heal from trauma and connect to a counselor who will be with you every step of the way.

Reach out to us at connect@barnabascenterhou.com if you want to learn more about trauma counseling. And check out these books and resources on trauma:

[The Body Keeps Score- Bessel van der Kolk](#)

[Try Softer- Aundi Kolbler](#)

[Getting Past Your Past- Francine Shapiro](#)



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