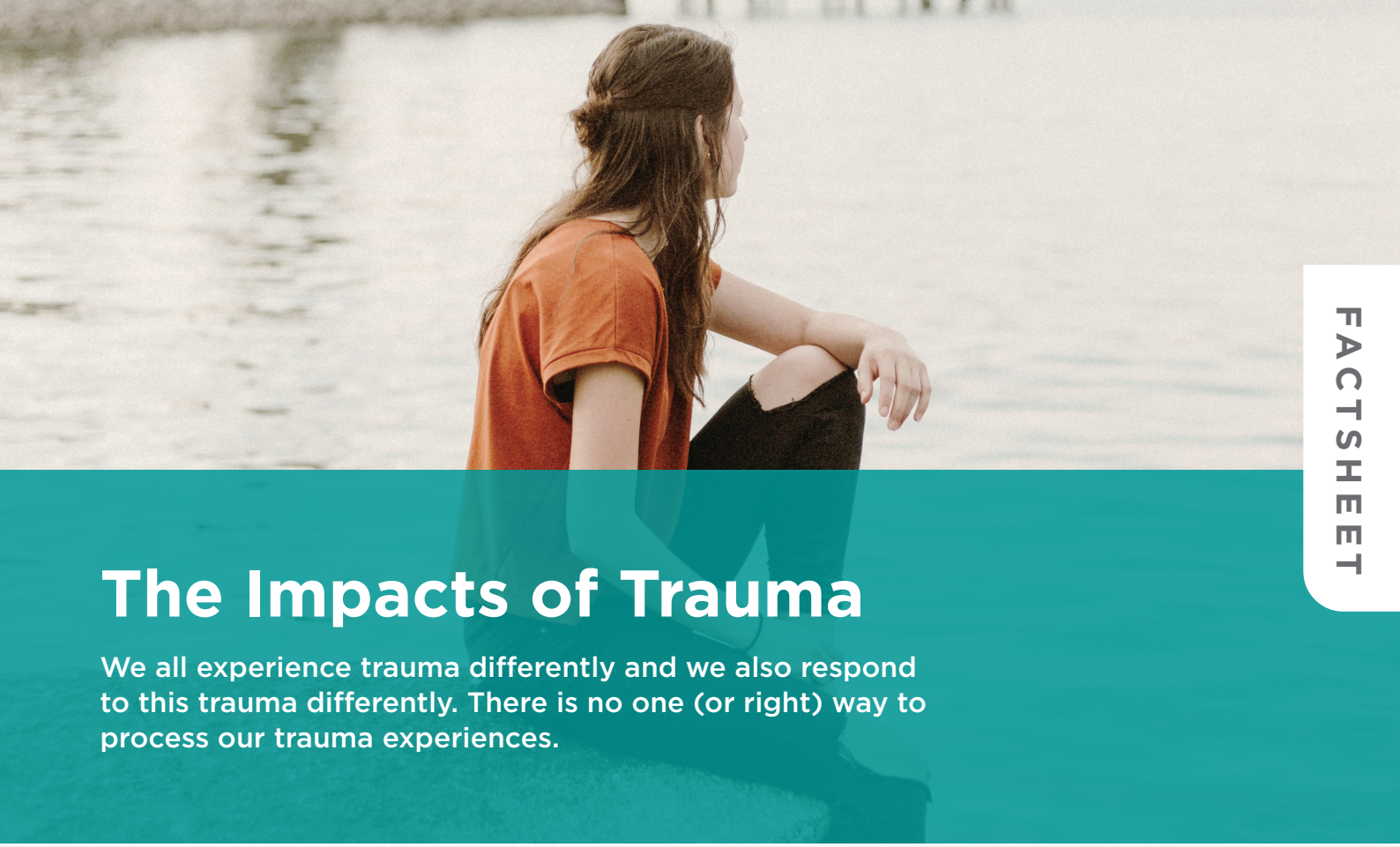

FACTSHEET

The Impacts of Trauma

We all experience trauma differently and we also respond to this trauma differently. There is no one (or right) way to process our trauma experiences.

WARNING: SOME OF THE INFORMATION IN THIS FACT SHEET MAY BE DIFFICULT TO READ. PLEASE TAKE YOUR TIME AND FIND ASSISTANCE IF YOU FEEL YOU NEED TO.

Chances are high that you have heard the terms 'trauma' and 'complex trauma' before. In the context of domestic/family violence, trauma is often defined as:

> **"An experience, or experiences, that lead an individual to think that they might die and have no control over the outcome."**

Trauma impacts us physically, behaviorally, emotionally, and spiritually. It also has an impact on our relationships, and it changes the way that our brain's function. There is a term called the 'neurobiology of trauma' and this is the way that trauma affects our bodies, our brains, and our nervous systems.

How does the neurobiology of trauma work?

Our nervous systems are designed to be alert to danger, to scan the environment, to make sure we survive, and to stay alive.

There is a part of our brain called the limbic system that lights up like an internal alarm system. When we perceive danger, we release stress hormones into our bodies. These hormones exist to make our muscles stronger, make our senses sharper, and to get away from danger quicker.

When we perceive that the danger has passed, those hormones lower and the internal alarm system reduces and then turns off.

If you experienced abuse during your childhood or your youth, or for a long time, your internal alarm system remains on. That is, it gets stuck on high. This then results in you being startled easily. You might find that sleep is difficult, and this is because you are always in a state of high alert. It also makes it hard to read social cues or facial expressions appropriately.

You might perceive danger that is not actually there; but your internal alarm system continues to ring to tell you that there is danger.

This is a problem because it makes it hard for your 'thinking brain', or the pre-frontal cortex, to step in so that you can think clearly and make good decisions. In other words it may be difficult to turn down that alarm.

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Therapy can help to soothe that system and turn down that internal alarm. Things like meditation, hypnotherapy and mind-body practices can also help to settle your system - to get your limbic system and pre-frontal cortex system working together.

Learning how to soothe and how to calm yourself helps you to live your life more in the present, to be able to make decisions more clearly, to respond to things in your environment and not react from a place of fear.

What is the Dysregulated Post-Trauma Brain?

Throughout the brain several chemical and biological imbalances can show up after you have experienced trauma. Their effects are especially exacerbated by three major brain function dysregulations:

1. Overstimulated amygdala

The amygdala is an almond-shaped mass located deep in your brain, and it is responsible for identifying threats to your survival as well as combining your memories and your emotions. Following trauma, the amygdala can be stuck in a state of high alertness and become stuck in an 'activated loop' which means that it looks for and sees threats to your survival everywhere.

2. Underactive hippocampus

After trauma, there is an increase in the stress hormone called 'glucocorticoid' and this kills cells in the hippocampus, which makes it less effective in making the synaptic connections that you need to be able to consolidate your memories. This keeps both your body and mind stimulated in 'reactive mode' because neither element receives the message that the threat is in the past and not in the present.

3. Ineffective variability

When your stress hormones are constantly high, this makes it hard for your body to be able to regulate itself. The 'sympathetic nervous system' instead stays highly activated which can make your body and many of your body's systems tired – especially the adrenal system.

What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

Your amygdala responds both to negative and positive things, but it is particularly attuned to identifying potential threats in your environment. The more your amygdala responds to negative images, the more likely you are to have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.

The Symptoms of PTSD:

- Intrusive thoughts (unwanted memories)
- Mood alterations (shame, blame, persistent negativity)
- Feeling anxious and 'jumpy' for no reason
- Hypervigilance (exaggerated startle response)
- Avoidance (of all sensory and emotional trauma -related material)
- Unexpected rage or tears
- Shortness of breath
- Increased heart rate
- Shaking
- Memory loss
- Difficulty concentrating
- Insomnia
- Nightmares
- Being emotionally numb
- Flashbacks

How Healing Happens

Although trauma changes to the brain can seem disastrous and feel like permanent damage, the truth is that all these changes caused by trauma can be reversed. That is, healing is possible. The amygdala can learn to relax, the hippocampus can go back to proper memory consolidation, and the nervous system can go back to its easy flow between reactive and restorative modes.

You can get help to heal from trauma, and/or help with your PTSD from:

- Your GP
- A community health centre
- Counsellor
- Psychologist
- Lifeline, and
- A domestic and family violence counselling service

Further Information

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