

# ADAPTING AFTER TRAUMA AND STRESS



We all face trauma, adversity, and other stresses throughout our lives. When people think of trauma, they often think of things like abuse, terrorism, or catastrophic events (big 'T' trauma). Trauma can also be caused by events that may be less obvious but can still overwhelm your capacity to cope, like frequent arguing at home or losing your job (little 't' trauma). Trauma of any kind can be hard on your mental health but working on becoming more resilient can help you feel more at ease.

## TIPS FOR HEALING



**Process your thoughts.** During and after experiencing trauma, it's common to go into survival mode and not have energy to wrap your head around what happened. It may feel safest to bury painful feelings and avoid confronting them, but acknowledging what happened and how it has impacted you is an important part of healing. When you feel ready, take time to think about how you've been affected (and be proud of yourself for pushing through).



**Connect with people.** The pain of trauma can lead some people to isolate themselves, but having a support system is a crucial part of wellbeing. Emotional support helps us to feel less alone or overwhelmed by what's going on or has happened in our lives. Talking to someone who has gone through a similar experience or someone who cares about you can be validating - and help you feel more able to overcome the challenges you're facing.



**Don't compare your experience to others'.** We often question our own thoughts or experiences, and you may convince yourself that what you experienced wasn't a big deal because "others have it worse." Everyone experiences trauma differently, and no one trauma is "worse" than another. If it hurt you, then it hurt you - and your feelings and experiences are valid.



**Take care of your body.** Stress and trauma impact your body and physical health just as much as your mind. Listening to your body and giving it what it needs will help you heal. This includes eating a nutritious diet, getting enough sleep, staying hydrated, and exercising regularly. Moving your body is especially helpful in trauma healing<sup>1</sup> - aim to do it every day, even if it's only a few minutes of stretching.



**Know it will take time.** There is no set timeline for how you "should" heal. Remove the pressure of needing to bounce back quickly and focus on taking it one step at a time. Remember: recovery isn't linear, and it's normal to have bad days and setbacks. It doesn't mean you're failing - it's just part of the process.



**Give yourself grace.** Dealing with trauma and stress is no easy feat, but it's still common to get frustrated with yourself and what can sometimes be a slow recovery process. Try to catch when you hold yourself to unreasonable standards - instead of angrily asking yourself "why am I acting like this?!", think about how impressive it is that you keep going, despite what you have faced.



**Don't feel ashamed to ask for help.** It's easy to compare how you're feeling to how you *assume* others who have been through similar experiences are feeling, and you may get down on yourself because it seems like everyone else is doing just fine. What others experience and how they cope doesn't matter in your journey - if you feel like you need (or want) help, it's important to get that as soon as you can.

## FAST FACTS

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Among people who took a screen at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) in 2020, past trauma was the second most reported cause for mental distress among screeners after loneliness.<sup>2</sup>

3x

People who have been through trauma are 3 times more likely to experience depression.<sup>3</sup>

53%

Of people who took a screen at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) in 2020 who scored with moderate to severe symptoms, over half (53%) reported past trauma as one of the three main contributors to their mental health problems.<sup>4</sup>

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### Sources

<sup>1</sup>Ivan de Kamp, M. M., Scheffers, M., Hatzmann, J., Emck, C., Cuijpers, P., & Beek, P. J. (2019). Body- and Movement-Oriented Interventions for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. *Journal of traumatic stress*, 32(6), 967-976. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22465>

<sup>2</sup>Proprietary data. [MHAScreening.org](https://mhascreening.org). 2020.

<sup>3</sup><https://www.nd.gov/dhs/info/pubs/docs/mhsa/trauma-statistics.pdf>

<sup>4</sup>Proprietary data. [MHAScreening.org](https://mhascreening.org). 2020.

# ACCEPTING REALITY



Sometimes in life we end up in situations that we just can't change. Radical acceptance is all about fully accepting your reality in situations that are beyond your control. This doesn't mean you approve of the situation, are giving up, or that it isn't painful. You are still allowed to (and should!) feel however you feel, but by accepting that it is what it is, you give the problem less power over you and you can begin to move forward.

## TIPS FOR SUCCESS



**Notice when you're fighting against reality.** The first step in accepting reality is gaining awareness that you're resisting it. It may seem like this would be easy to spot, but there are actually a lot of subtle ways that people push against reality. If you're feeling bitter or resentful, wishing things were different, or thinking about how life isn't fair, you might be fighting reality.



**Remind yourself that you can't change what has already happened.** Before you can make peace with reality, you have to acknowledge that there's no going back to the way things were. Doing this may be challenging and painful, but by identifying what you can and can't control, you can turn your energy towards coping with the things you can't change.



**Embrace your feelings.** You might still be angry, scared, overwhelmed, or lonely – that's okay. Accepting reality includes everything that you're feeling, too. When you accept these feelings and let yourself experience them without any judgement, you can work through them in a healthy way.



**Pretend that you're accepting reality.** Even if you're still struggling to fully accept reality, think about what it would look like if you *did*. How would you act if you simply accepted things as they are? What would your next step be? Changing your behaviors and actions to reflect "pretend acceptance" can help you to actually shift your thoughts.



**Relax your body.** If you're feeling stressed or are pushing against the reality of your situation, there's a good chance your body is tense. This is often associated with resistance and keeps your mind on high alert. Physically relaxing your body can help you feel more ready to accept what is reality. Try yoga, taking a hot bath or shower, deep breathing exercises, or getting a massage to help you relax.



**Use coping statements.** These are sentences that remind you that different, healthier ways of thinking are possible. Repeating them can help you get through difficult moments – you can focus on just one or make a long list of your own. Some examples are: *It is what it is. I can't change what has already happened. I can accept things the way they are. I can only control my own actions and reactions.* If it helps, write your coping statements on Post-It notes and put them in places where you will see them multiple times a day, or set an alarm/create an event on your phone with a coping statement to pop up with a reminder every now and again.



**Know that it takes practice.** Radical acceptance is a great tool to cope with hard situations that we can't control, but it can take a while before it comes easily. Don't get down on yourself if you don't master it immediately. Start by trying it out in smaller situations, like when you're stuck in traffic or your internet is acting up during a call. By practicing radical acceptance on a daily basis, it will be easier to use as a coping tool when bigger, tougher challenges come your way.

## FAST FACTS



Practicing radical acceptance has been shown to reduce feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety.<sup>1</sup>



Acceptance coping skills are linked to lower rates of mental illness and suicide.<sup>2</sup>



Radical acceptance can reduce distress in dealing with negative thoughts or events.<sup>3</sup>

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### Sources

<sup>1</sup>Goerg, N., Priebe, K., Bohnke, J., Steil, R., Dyer, A., & Kleindienst, N. (2017). Trauma-related emotions and radical acceptance in dialectical behavior therapy for posttraumatic stress disorder after childhood sexual abuse. *Borderline Personality Disorder and Emotion Dysregulation*, 4(1), 15–15. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40479-017-0065-5>

<sup>2</sup>Li, Ziyao, and Jie Zhang. "Coping Skills, Mental Disorders, and Suicide Among Rural Youths in China." *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, 200.10 (2012): 885–890. Web.

<sup>3</sup>Iverson, K. M., Follette, V. M., Pistorello, J., & Fruzzetti, A. E. (2012). An investigation of experiential avoidance, emotion dysregulation, and distress tolerance in young adult outpatients with borderline personality disorder symptoms. *Personality Disorders: Theory, Research, and Treatment*, 3(4), 415–422. <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy1.lib.asu.edu/10.1037/a0023703>

# DEALING WITH ANGER AND FRUSTRATION



In challenging times, you may find that you have little patience with other people or get upset over minor things. Anger and frustration are complicated emotions that often stem from other feelings, like disappointment, fear, and stress. Taking some extra steps to decrease your overall tension can prevent your feelings (and the reactions that they cause) from spiraling out of control.

## TIPS FOR COPING



**Pause before reacting.** When you feel yourself getting mad, take a moment to notice what you're thinking, then take a few deep breaths or count to ten in your head. By giving yourself even just a few seconds before reacting, you can put some emotional distance between you and whatever is upsetting you – and you might even realize that you're actually tense because of something else.



**Change your surroundings.** Anger can make you feel trapped. Whether you're mad at someone in the same room as you or just angry at the world, sometimes physically relocating yourself can help you start to calm down. Go to another room or step outside for a few minutes of fresh air to help disrupt the track that your mind is on.



**Get it all out.** Keeping your feelings bottled up never works, so allow yourself time to be angry and complain. As long as you don't focus on it for too long, venting can be a healthy outlet for your anger. You can open up to a trusted friend or write it all down in a journal. Sometimes it feels better to pretend to talk directly to the person (or situation) that you're angry at – pick an empty chair, pretend they're sitting in it, and say what you need to get off your chest.



**Release built up energy.** Anger is a high-energy emotion, and we store that energy and tension physically in our bodies. Exercise is a great way to get rid of extra energy and can improve your mood. Some people find grounding exercises (like meditation or deep breathing) helpful to calm intense feelings, while others prefer more high impact activities like running or weightlifting. Think about what you usually do to decompress, like taking a hot shower or blasting your favorite music and use the tools that you know work for you.



**Get organized.** When things around you feel chaotic, it's often a lot easier to get frustrated and snap at people. Dedicate a few minutes each day to tidying, planning, or reorganizing. Implementing a routine can also help you feel more on top of things by adding structure and certainty to your daily life.



**Eliminate stressors if possible.** Sometimes there's no way to completely get rid of a big problem, but there's often more than just one issue contributing to your frustration. Things like an overwhelming workload or unhealthy relationship can make you feel on edge. Pay attention to how and why you're feeling stressed and see if you can make small changes to improve a challenging situation to make it less burdensome.



**Manage your expectations.** Negative feelings often stem from people or situations not meeting your standards or assumptions. It's frustrating to feel let down but recognize that you can't fully predict anyone else's behavior or how situations will play out. Shift your mental framework so that you aren't setting yourself up for disappointment.



**Don't be afraid to ask for help.** If you're working to cope with your anger but feel like you can't get it under control, it's time to get some extra support. Anger can fester and become explosive if not resolved. A number of mental health conditions can manifest as anger, so this may actually be a sign of depression or anxiety – treating an underlying condition can help heal your anger as well.

## FAST FACTS



Of people who took an anxiety screen at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) in 2020, 71% felt easily annoyed or irritable at least half of the time or nearly every day.<sup>1</sup>



Of people who took a bipolar screen at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) in 2020, 82% reported being so irritable that they shouted at people or started fights or arguments.<sup>2</sup>



One poll found that 91% of respondents said that they feel people are more likely to express their anger on social media than they are face-to-face.<sup>3</sup>

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### Sources

<sup>1</sup>Proprietary data. MHAScreening.org. 2020.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>IBM Watson Health-NPR Health Poll. November 1-14, 2018. <https://www.ibm.com/downloads/cas/2YQ8NLD5>

# GETTING OUT OF THINKING TRAPS



It's easy to fall into negative thinking patterns and spend time bullying yourself, dwelling on the past, or worrying about the future. It's part of how we're wired – the human brain reacts more intensely to negative events than to positive ones and is more likely to remember insults than praise. During tough times, negative thoughts are especially likely to spiral out of control. When these thoughts make something out to be worse in your head than it is in reality, they are called cognitive distortions.

## COMMON COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS

**Overgeneralization:** Making a broad statement based off one situation or piece of evidence.

**Personalization:** Blaming yourself for events beyond your control; taking things personally when they aren't actually connected to you.

**Filtering:** Focusing on the negative details of a situation while ignoring the positive.

**All-or-Nothing Thinking:** Only seeing the extremes of a situation.

**Catastrophizing:** Blowing things out of proportion; dwelling on the worst possible outcomes.

**Jumping to Conclusions:** Judging or deciding something without all the facts.

**Emotional Reasoning:** Thinking that however you feel is fully and unarguably true. **Discounting the Positive:** Explaining all positives away as luck or coincidence.

**"Should" Statements:** Making yourself feel guilty by pointing out what you should or shouldn't be doing, feeling, or thinking.

## TIPS FOR CHALLENGING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS



**Reframe.** Think of a different way to view the situation. If your negative thought is "I can't do anything right," a kinder way to reframe it is, "I messed up, but nobody's perfect," or a more constructive thought is "I messed up, but now I know to prepare more for next time." It can be hard to do this when you're feeling down on yourself, so ask yourself what you'd tell your best friend if they were saying those things about themselves.



**Prove yourself wrong.** The things you do impact how you feel – what actions can you take to combat your negative thoughts? For instance, if you're telling yourself you aren't smart because you don't understand how the stock market works, learn more about a subject you understand and enjoy, like history. If you feel like no one cares about you, call a friend. Give yourself evidence that these thoughts aren't entirely true.



**Counter negative thoughts with positive ones.** When you catch your inner dialogue being mean to you, make yourself say something nice to balance it out. This may feel cheesy at first and self-love can be hard, so don't give up if it feels awkward in the beginning. Name things you love, like, or even just don't hate about yourself – we all have to start somewhere!



**Remember: thoughts aren't facts.** Your thoughts and feelings are valid, but they aren't always reality. You might feel ugly, but that doesn't mean you *are*. Often times we can be our own worst enemies – other people are seeing us in a much nicer light than how we see ourselves.

## FAST FACTS



Of people who took an anxiety screen at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) in 2020, 64% felt afraid, as if something awful might happen at least half of the time or nearly every day.<sup>1</sup>



Half of people who took a depression screen at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) in 2020 felt that they were a failure or had let themselves or their families down nearly every day.<sup>2</sup>



One study found that 85% of what we worry about never happens at all, and in the 15% of times where worries came true, 79% of people handled the difficulty better than expected, or learned a valuable lesson.<sup>3</sup>

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### Sources

<sup>1</sup>Proprietary data. MHAScreening.org. 2020.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Matthews, G., Wells, A. (2000). Attention, automaticity, and affective disorder. *Behavior Modification*, 24, 69-93.



# PROCESSING BIG CHANGES



Change is a guaranteed part of life. It's something everyone experiences at one point or another — good or bad. Sometimes that change happens in big ways when we aren't expecting it or aren't prepared for it. These types of situations can make navigating your path forward really difficult. By providing yourself with tools for processing change, you can adapt more easily.

## TIPS FOR PROCESSING CHANGE



**Focus on what you can control.** One of the hardest things about big change is how helpless it can often make you feel. At some point, you'll probably have to accept the change that you're experiencing and then focus on what you can control within that. For example, you can control how you react to situations, how you start each day, or how nice you are to yourself and others. It can be comforting to know that there are still things that you have control over, even when other things are changing.



**Write out your feelings on paper.** When you're processing big changes, your brain may feel like it's constantly racing. It's easy to feel overwhelmed with all of the things you're feeling and thinking. Instead of holding it all in your mind, allow yourself to release it. Writing things down is one of the best ways to do that. Start a journal—jot down a quick list of your thoughts and feelings or write a letter to yourself or someone else. Just get it all out onto paper.



**Keep up your self-care where you can.** When so much of your life feels different and overwhelming, it's tempting to want to stay in bed or on the sofa and avoid what's bothering you. However, it's important to keep up your normal habits as much as possible, especially when it comes to protecting your mental health. The changes you're facing may mean a totally different routine, but incorporating the small, familiar self-care habits that you know work for you — even if it's something simple like showering or taking a walk after dinner — can give you the mental clarity to process the big changes.



**Find support.** With any change that you're facing right now, there's a good chance that someone else has felt the exact same way that you're feeling too. Depending on what you're struggling with, you may be able to talk to friends or family about it, find an online support group, or open up to a mental health professional. Whoever it ends up being that you turn to, having someone who can listen and provide support can help you through any transition you're working through.



**Tune into the good.** No matter what kind of change has come into your life, there is most likely some grief that coincides with processing it. Even a seemingly good change like getting a new job can have you grieving the day-to-day interactions you had with coworkers where you used to work. Let yourself grieve, but also try not to get stuck spiraling into the fear, anguish, and negativity that those changes may bring. Instead, try and retrain your brain to think of the positives in your life by doing things like practicing gratitude, focusing on the small things that bring you joy, or reframing challenges as opportunities.



**Make plans.** It's okay if you aren't an incredibly organized person, but when you're processing big changes, it can be helpful to focus on planning. You don't have to stick to your plan perfectly; just starting small with what your day or week is going to look like can help get rid of that uncertainty that comes with change.



**Think of your strength.** Big changes tend to challenge and test you, but it's likely that you'll grow from all of the things that you're facing. Remind yourself as often as possible that you are strong and capable and can make it through whatever challenges you're facing (and that you've made it through some tough changes in the past). Maybe even say it out loud to yourself to really let it sink in. With each passing day, you're building resilience.

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## FAST FACTS



People that journaled about significant events reported more satisfaction with their lives and better mental health over those that did not.<sup>1</sup>



Strong social support from family members following significant life events seriously lessens depression symptoms in teens and has a lasting positive effect in dealing with life changes.<sup>2</sup>



Adults who avoid problems struggle more with depression later on than those who actively approach problems with coping strategies.<sup>3</sup>

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# TAKING TIME FOR YOURSELF



There are always a handful of roles that each of us are juggling. If you are a parent, a student, an employee, a caretaker, someone struggling with a mental health concern, or are just feeling overwhelmed with the responsibilities of day-to-day life, the idea of taking time for yourself may seem unimaginable. Sometimes it can be difficult to even take basic care of ourselves - but there are small things that can be done to make self-care and taking time for ourselves a little bit easier.

## TIPS FOR TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF



**Accept yourself as you are.** Remember that you are running your own race. Try not to compare your life and what it looks like right now to anyone else's. When you start comparing yourself to others, it's easy to feel inadequate, which makes it hard to even take the very first step in self-care. Instead, try your best to accept the person that you are and where you are in life right now.



**Focus on the basics.** Sometimes being an adult is not easy and it can feel impossible to get even the littlest things done. Taking time for yourself doesn't necessarily mean treating yourself to special things. One of the most important things you can do is focus on steps to ensure you're living a healthy lifestyle. Showering and brushing your teeth every day, eating nutrient-rich food, moving your body, and getting good sleep are all building blocks of good self-care.



**Find what makes you happy.** If you're caught up in taking care of all of your responsibilities — rather than taking care of yourself — you may not even really know what kind of self-care you need. What works for someone else may not work for you. Take time to think about what things you can do to make yourself feel happy or accomplished and include them in building the self-care routine that makes the most sense for you, your schedule, and your health overall.



**Practice mindfulness.** Mindfulness is one of the best ways to make the most out of any amount of time that you do have to care for yourself. Take a few slow, deep breaths, focus on each of your senses, and try to be fully present in whatever you're doing. Not only does mindfulness reduce stress, it also has the power to help you slow down and really take care of yourself — even in the midst of all of life's challenges and responsibilities.



**Make small goals.** Unfortunately, taking time for yourself doesn't just happen overnight, so try to be patient. Instead of putting pressure on yourself to immediately have the perfect self-care routine established, set small goals that you want to accomplish for yourself. Focus on small, daily tasks like wanting to take a 15-minute walk outside each day, or journaling for 10 minutes every night — rather than a complete overhaul of your life, all at once.



**Set some boundaries.** Sometimes, the only way to really be able to make time for self-care is to lessen the amount of time or energy that you are giving away to other people. Having the sometimes tough conversations with people that set boundaries around your time, your emotions, your things, your other relationships, your health, and your opinions can give you an opportunity to devote more time and effort to yourself and your own mental health.



**Remember that you are not alone.** Everyone struggles to take time for themselves, so try not to get down on yourself for not having everything perfectly balanced all of the time. As circumstances change, you'll probably have to rethink your routines and how you use your time many times throughout your life. There will always be people that understand where you're coming from and are willing to help. Ask your friends and family for help when you need to take some time for your mental health. They may even be able to offer you some guidance on how they manage self-care and take time for their own well-being.

## FAST FACTS



On average, people only spend 15 minutes a day on health-related self-care.<sup>1</sup>



Self-care is proven to reduce stress and anxiety levels while increasing self-compassion.<sup>2</sup>



Of people who took a depression screen at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) in 2020, 73% felt tired or said that they had very little energy at least half of the time or nearly every day.<sup>3</sup>

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