


Understanding

# Trauma and substance use



## Continuum of traumatic events

Being bullied, living with family violence, not having people who cared for you growing up.

Physical or emotional abuse, neglect, loss of a family member or loved one, feeling unsafe in your environment or community.

Being in, or witnessing a serious accident, physical or sexual assault or natural disaster, being threatened with a weapon or being held captive.

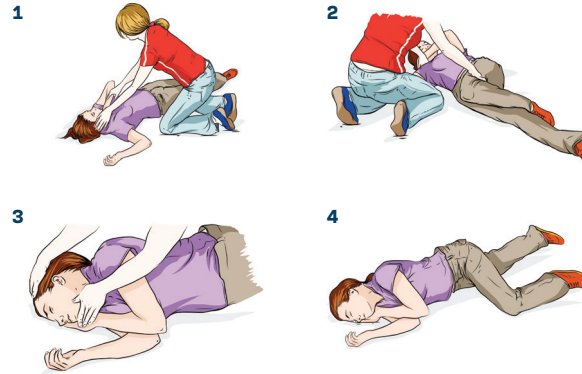
## What are the signs of trauma?

Some people may be more sensitive to the effects of trauma and what's traumatic for one person might not be for someone else. Many people who have experienced trauma can experience ongoing difficulties such as:

- Sleep problems, feeling on edge, restless, easily startled, and irritable
- Feeling numb, detached, depressed, and hopeless
- Having nightmares and flashbacks that feel like they're back in the traumatic event
- Trouble concentrating and doing everyday things
- Emotions and thoughts that feel out of control
- Shame or guilt about what happened
- Trouble with relationships and interacting with others
- Avoiding things that remind them of what happened
- Thoughts about the traumatic event that keep coming up

## What should I do in an emergency?

If someone has collapsed or lost consciousness, call an ambulance on **triple zero (000)**. If they have stopped breathing commence CPR. If they are breathing normally, place them into the recovery position and continue to monitor them.



## Need to know more?

Adis 24/7 Alcohol and Drug Support is a 24 hour, 7 day a week confidential support service for people in Queensland with alcohol and other drug concerns, their loved ones and health professionals.



**Talk to us. Anytime, anywhere.**

adis.health.qld.gov.au | 1800 177 833  
(free call)

## Understanding

# Trauma and substance use

### ➤ What is trauma?

Trauma is an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

### ➤ How does trauma affect people?

When people experience a traumatic event they often feel fear, vulnerability or helplessness and then gradually recover and feel better again. However, sometimes it can be hard to recover from what has happened and people can have problems that don't go away. People who have these problems are sometimes diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or they may have other difficulties with emotions, physical problems, and relationships.

Sometimes difficult thoughts and feelings associated with something that happened a long time ago can come up unexpectedly and traumatic events that happen in childhood may affect people throughout their life.

"I was really shocked when my case manager started talking about the trauma I had experienced. I had never thought of it that way – I knew there were some really awful things that happened to me when I was growing up but I had never thought of them as traumatic events."



### ➤ Understanding trauma and substance use

Many people use substances (ie alcohol and other drugs) to cope with difficulties associated with trauma. Current research shows that the majority of people receiving AOD treatment have experienced at least one traumatic event and many have experienced multiple traumas. Of concern, up to two thirds of people receiving AOD treatment have PTSD and many are struggling with trauma related issues.

#### Many people who have problems with substance use have experienced trauma

Some people may use substances to 'self-medicate' and manage difficult thoughts, feelings and emotions. However, while substances may provide some short-term relief they can often make the problem worse in the long-term as:

- PTSD symptoms become more severe
- Life becomes complicated with relationship issues, financial problems, impacts on study or work and legal problems
- Substance dependence makes it harder to stop
- People feel more shame and negative self-beliefs

### ➤ What can help?

Trying to manage the effects of trauma by blocking out difficult memories and feelings doesn't work. While it makes sense for people to try and avoid what causes them to feel worried or uncomfortable, unresolved trauma can impact on a person's short and long-term recovery as the underlying issues remain.

There are effective psychological treatments for people who have experienced trauma which can help them to process what has happened, understand how it has affected them, and provide strategies and better ways to manage their difficulties. These treatments can help to reduce PTSD symptoms and enable people to learn how to cope better with uncomfortable thoughts, feelings and emotions.

"I didn't want to talk about what had happened to me. I was drinking all the time just to block it out. Getting help was hard, but not getting help meant I was always going to feel this way and everything was getting worse. Going to therapy has made such a difference – I just wish I'd done it sooner!"



### ➤ What help is available?

People who are concerned about trauma should talk to their doctor, or health professional to get support or contact **Adis 24/7 Alcohol and Drug Support on 1800 177 833.**