

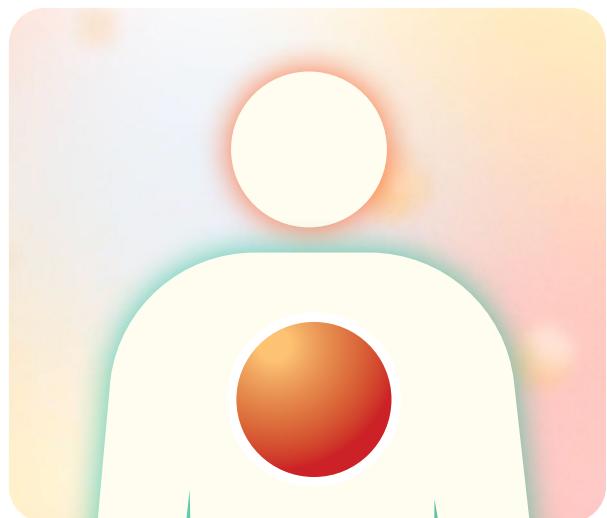
# COPING WITH POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS INJURIES

Research has shown that public safety personnel (PSP) and military members experience mental health disorder symptoms at a higher rate than the general population.

Symptoms of post-traumatic stress injuries (PTSIs) can negatively affect your physical, mental and emotional health. These effects can alter your personal and professional relationships, making it harder to function over time. You can learn more about the effects of PTSIs in our [What are PTSIs resource](#).

Knowing when to seek help is important. Remember: you are not alone and there are options available to help you cope.

**Learning healthy coping strategies and using them regularly can help combat the negative effects of PTSIs.** This fact sheet outlines various strategies that can be helpful, as well as some that may be harmful.



## Potentially harmful coping behaviours

As you learn to cope with a PTSI, pay attention to coping behaviours that can disrupt your recovery. It is important to monitor these behaviours and to work to minimize the potential harm. Some examples of potentially harmful coping behaviours include:

- Substance use (alcohol, cannabis, other substances)
- Gambling
- Self-isolation
- Over- or under-eating
- Excessive shopping or gaming



# COPING STRATEGIES

Each individual needs to develop their own set of coping strategies. A strategy that works for you might not work for someone else and vice versa. It can be intimidating to face the symptoms of a PTSI head-on. Start small with strategies that are easy to work into your daily routine. Below are several options that have proven effective.

## Mental



**Mindfulness:** Finding time for mindfulness techniques can be helpful to calm our bodies and minds. Begin with one or two minutes a day. The goal is to be aware of your feelings without interpretation or judgment. As you start to feel more comfortable, you can increase the time spent on mindfulness.



**Grounding techniques:** When you are experiencing a PTSI, your brain can change in ways that allows the reactive, fearful part of your brain to go into overdrive and override rational thinking processes. These changes can produce a cycle of uncomfortable symptoms, such as flashbacks or anxiety. Grounding techniques are a way to slow down that reactive, fearful part of your brain. There are several different grounding exercises, and it is important to find one that works for you.



**Awareness of triggers:** Being aware of your triggers is an important part of learning how to deal with your PTSI symptoms. Triggers can be anything that reminds you of your traumatic experience(s). Some examples are people, places, smells and sounds. It's natural to want to avoid your triggers, but this can be disruptive to your life. Learning to identify triggers can help you prepare a plan for how to cope with them rather than having to avoid them completely.

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An example is 5-4-3-2-1, an exercise where you list five things you see, four things you feel, three things you hear, two things you smell and one thing you taste. By focusing on your present experience, you can pull yourself out of your cycle of symptoms.



**Education:** Educating yourself about PTSS, which can include learning about symptoms and treatments, can validate your experience and allow you to cope better. Open communication between the person experiencing a PTSI and Family members such as their spouse or partner and children can support learning and understanding as you navigate through the recovery journey together.

## Physical

**Exercise:** Research has shown that physical activity can help our bodies cope with stress. Even a short 10-minute walk can benefit your mood. Find out what forms of movement you enjoy and work to incorporate them into your day.



**Eating healthy:** Being well-nourished can strengthen our ability to cope with stress. A simple way to start eating healthier might be to add a piece of fruit to your breakfast routine or a vegetable option to supper.

**Sleeping well:** Sleep is an essential component of maintaining our physical and mental health. It is also often one of the first things to change when experiencing stress. Educate yourself about your sleep needs and try to keep to a sleep schedule, even when on shift. You can find more tips and resources in CIPSRT's [Sleep 101 Toolkit](#).



## Emotional



**Peer support:** It is common to self-isolate when we are stressed. PSP and current and former military members can also feel like others will not understand their stress. Through formal or informal peer support, finding a peer to talk to can support your mental health. Learn more in our [resource on peer support](#).



**Time with Family and friends:** Making an effort to schedule time with Family and friends can be an important way to decompress from work.



**Pets:** Pets can provide an unconditional relationship that may offer a sense of calm and reassurance.

## General strategies



**Hobbies:** Having a hobby that is separate from your daily work can help you enjoy life more. Find an activity that you look forward to and takes your mind off work, whether that's painting, woodworking, biking or knitting.

**Time off:** Although taking time away from work will not solve the underlying problem, it can give you time to deal with your symptoms, which is an essential part of healing.



# SEEKING PROFESSIONAL HELP

Regular use of coping skills can help to improve your symptoms. However, they can only get you so far. Seeking help from a qualified professional may be a key part of your healing journey. A professional can provide evidence-based treatments and approaches that can support your recovery. Some typical first-line treatments they might recommend are:

**Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT):** CBT is a practical, problem-focused and goal-oriented form of treatment that can help you learn to identify, challenge and alter problematic ways of thinking.

**Cognitive processing therapy (CPT):** CPT focuses on how you have processed your trauma. It helps you look at the thoughts that stop you from healing. Through CPT, you learn to redefine your thoughts and feelings about your trauma to become emotionally balanced.

**Cognitive therapy for PTSD (CT-PTSD):** CT-PTSD helps you develop a more balanced perspective on your trauma and unlearn negative coping mechanisms. CT-PTSD guides you through the memories of your trauma to help you understand that your trauma is no longer a threat.

**Prolonged exposure therapy (PE):** PE therapy is designed to help people work through their fears. People often avoid things that cause fear or distress. Exposure therapy involves confronting, in a safe environment, objects, activities or situations that are feared or avoided to help reduce fear and distress.

**Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR):** EMDR is focused on the emotions and symptoms after an event. The treatment involves engaging in rhythmic side-to-side eye movements (similar to watching a pendulum swing) while thinking about the event. EMDR can help reduce or dampen the intensity of emotionally charged memories.

## Other options for therapy



**Art therapy:** Art therapy combines the creative process and psychotherapy, facilitating self-exploration and understanding. Using imagery, colour and shape as part of this creative therapeutic process, thoughts and feelings can be expressed that would otherwise be difficult to articulate.



**Animal-assisted therapy (AAT):** AAT uses the ability of the human-animal bond to improve the results of individual or group therapies. AAT can be used with clients of any age.



**Drug-based therapies:** The use of anti-depressants or anti-anxiety medications may be recommended for the treatment of PTSSIs. These medications are often used in tandem with one of the talk therapies listed above.

Visit the website to learn more: [atlasveterans.ca/PSP](https://atlasveterans.ca/PSP)

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