

Understanding Trauma and the Body

A Psychoeducation Resource for Muslim Clients

Clinical note: Before you begin: reading about trauma can sometimes activate trauma responses. If at any point you feel overwhelmed, pause, place your feet flat on the floor, take three slow breaths, and notice five things you can see in the room around you. You can return to this worksheet later. There is no urgency.

What Is Trauma?

Trauma is not the event itself. Trauma is what happens inside the body and mind when an event overwhelms the nervous system's capacity to cope at the time. Two people can experience the same event and one may be traumatised while the other is not. This is not about strength or weakness of character. It is about what resources, support, and prior experiences each person brought into the moment.

Trauma can come from a single overwhelming event (acute trauma), repeated events over time (complex trauma), events witnessed in the lives of others (secondary trauma), or events transmitted through generations and communities (intergenerational and collective trauma). For Australian Muslim clients, all four can be present, sometimes simultaneously.

An Islamic frame for trauma

Allah does not deny that human beings are tested with overwhelming experiences. The Qur'an names hardship explicitly:

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِّنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالثَّمَرَاتِ ۗ وَبَشِّرِ
الصَّابِرِينَ

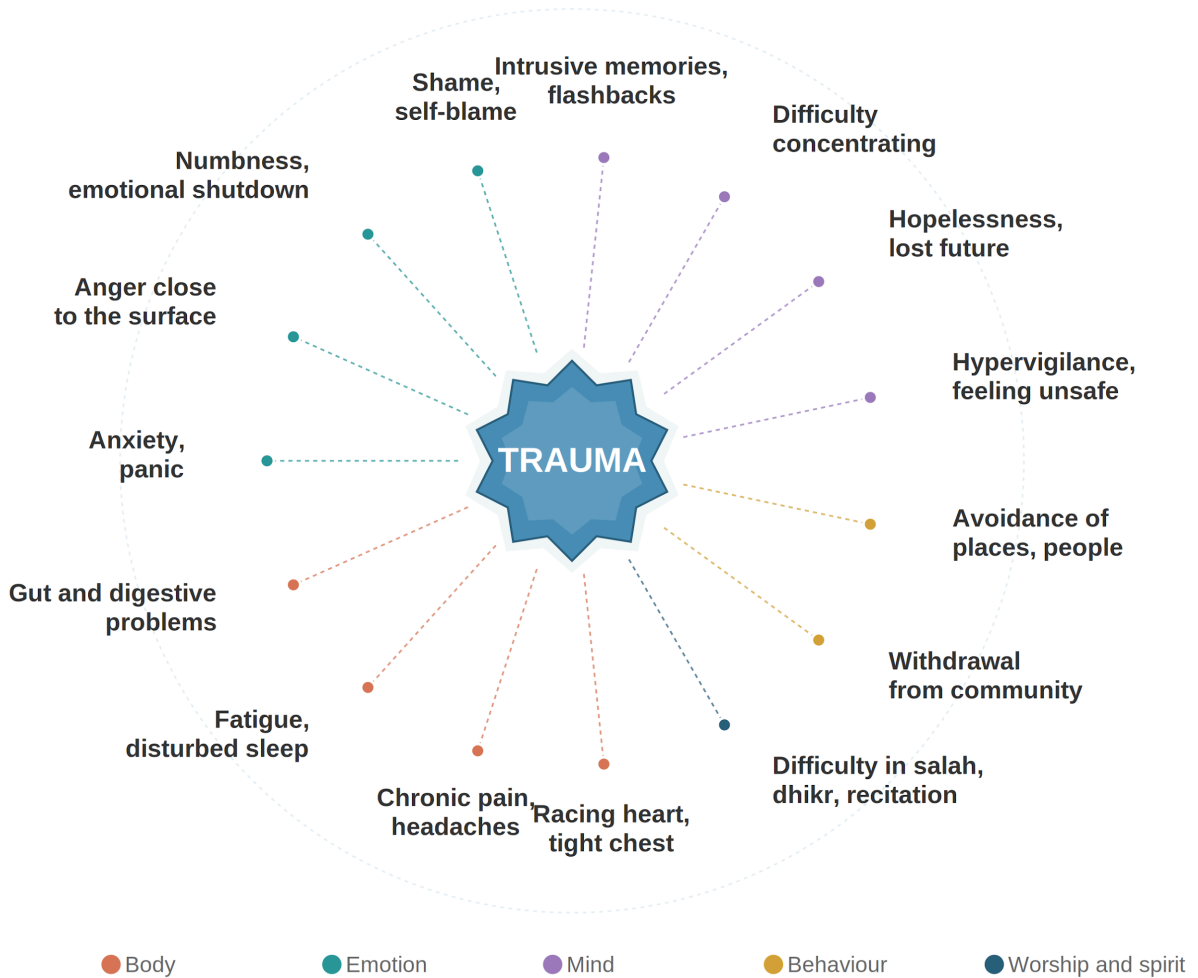
“And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient.”

Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:155 (Sahih International translation).

The verse names fear (al-khawf) first. Allah does not minimise it. The Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) himself experienced what we would today recognise as a trauma response after the first revelation in the cave of Hira. He returned to Khadijah (may Allah be pleased with her) shaking, asking her to cover him. She did not shame him for his fear. She held him, fed him, and connected him to a wise elder for support. This Prophetic example is itself a trauma-informed response.

Section 1: How Trauma Shows Across the Whole Self

Trauma does not stay in one part of us. It expresses itself across the body, emotions, mind, behaviour, and even worship. The diagram below maps common signs, grouped by where they show up. Notice the ones that feel familiar to you. You may experience some, many, or none of these. All responses are valid.



Clinical note: *If you see yourself in many of these, please know: these are not failures of character or faith. They are how the human nervous system responds when it has been overwhelmed. Naming them is the first step toward gentleness with yourself.*

Reflection

Which of these signs feel most familiar to me right now?

Were there any I had not previously connected to trauma?

Section 2: What Happens in the Body During Trauma

During an overwhelming event, the body's threat-detection system, centred in a small structure called the amygdala, takes over. Slower, reasoning parts of the brain (the prefrontal cortex) go offline. The body shifts into one of four common survival responses, designed by Allah to keep us alive.

The Body's Four Survival Responses

Designed by Allah to keep us alive when overwhelmed

<p>FIGHT</p> <p><i>The body prepares to push back</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Muscles tighten• Heart rate climbs• Jaw clenches• Attention narrows on threat• Urge to defend or confront	<p>FLIGHT</p> <p><i>The body prepares to escape</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Legs feel charged• Eyes scan for exits• Breathing quickens• Restlessness, can't sit still• Urge to leave
<p>FREEZE</p> <p><i>When fight or flight is not possible</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Muscles lock• Breath shallows• Time may seem to slow• Mind goes blank• Feeling of being stuck	<p>FAWN</p> <p><i>Attempt to appease the threat</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Urge to please or comply• Difficulty saying no• Suppressing own needs• Hyper-attunement to others• Common in inescapable relational trauma

None of these are weaknesses of character or failures of faith. They are biological responses Allah built into the human body.

Most people have a default response that the body has learned over time. Some people move between different responses depending on the situation. Recognising your own pattern is part of working with it rather than against it.

Reflection

Which of these four responses do I recognise most in myself?

How has this response helped me survive?

Section 3: What Happens After

In most people, the nervous system returns to balance over days or weeks following a difficult event, especially with support, safety, and rest. For some, the system stays activated longer than expected. This is when trauma responses become persistent.

Common persistent trauma responses

- Re-experiencing: flashbacks, intrusive memories, nightmares
- Avoidance: of places, people, conversations, or thoughts linked to the event
- Hyperarousal: feeling on edge, easily startled, difficulty sleeping, anger close to the surface
- Negative changes in mood and thinking: numbness, hopelessness, self-blame, distorted beliefs about self or world
- Dissociation: feeling unreal, detached from body, gaps in memory, time loss
- Somatic symptoms: chronic pain, gut issues, fatigue, muscle tension, headaches

How many of these am I noticing in myself?

Clinical note: *If many of these have been present for more than a month following a difficult event, or if they are interfering with your daily life, please speak with a clinician. Trauma is treatable. The earlier the support, the gentler the recovery.*

Section 4: Why Understanding Helps

One of the most painful parts of trauma is the feeling of being broken or weak. Understanding what is actually happening in the body can shift this self-perception.

If your heart races when you walk into a room similar to where the event happened, your body is not betraying you. It is doing exactly what it was designed to do: protect you. The work of recovery is not to override this system but to gently teach it that it is now safe.

From the Sunnah: a model of co-regulation

When the Prophet (peace be upon him) returned trembling from Hira, Khadijah (may Allah be pleased with her) said to him:

“By Allah, Allah will never disgrace you. You uphold the ties of kinship, you carry the weak, you give to those who have nothing, you honour your guests, and you support the truth in times of difficulty.”

Sahih al-Bukhari, Book of Revelation, Hadith 3.

Khadijah did three things that contemporary trauma research now identifies as core to recovery: she provided physical safety (covering him), she affirmed his identity and worth (naming his goodness), and she connected him to a wise elder (Waraqah ibn Nawfal) for further support. Recovery from trauma rarely happens in isolation. It happens in safe relationships.

Section 5: Pathways Toward Recovery

Recovery is not linear. It is generally described in three broad phases, though people move between them rather than through them in order.

Phase 1: Safety and stabilisation

Establishing physical safety, learning grounding skills, regulating sleep and routine, building a support network. Most early therapy work happens here. Du'a, salah, and dhikr can be powerful stabilisers when integrated with somatic regulation.

Phase 2: Processing

With sufficient stabilisation, the trauma memory itself can be approached and gradually integrated. Evidence-based approaches include trauma-focused CBT, EMDR, and narrative exposure. This phase is best done with a trained clinician.

Phase 3: Reconnection and meaning-making

Rebuilding life around what now matters, reconnecting with relationships and community, and for many Muslim clients, rebuilding or deepening relationship with Allah after the trauma. Some clients find their iman strengthened through trauma; others struggle. Both are common, neither is shameful.

A verse to hold

وَجَعَلْنَا مِنَ الْمَاءِ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ حَيٍّ

“And We made from water every living thing.”

Qur'an, Surah Al-Anbiya, 21:30 (Sahih International translation).

Wudu is among the simplest stabilisation practices. The cool water, the slowing of pace, the verses spoken with each step, the focus on the body. The Prophetic practice of wudu is a profound somatic intervention.

Section 6: A Brief Self-Reflection

This is not a diagnostic tool. It is a reflection to help you decide whether to seek further support.

In the past month, have I experienced...

Sign	Yes	Sometimes	No

Items to consider, one per row above:

1. Unwanted memories of a difficult event
2. Difficulty sleeping or nightmares
3. Avoiding places, people, or topics linked to a difficult event
4. Feeling on edge, easily startled, or watchful
5. Feeling numb, detached, or unreal
6. Difficulty in salah, dhikr, or recitation due to intrusive thoughts

Clinical note: *If you marked Yes or Sometimes for several of these and they have been present for more than a month, this is worth bringing to a clinician. Trauma is treatable, and treatment for Muslim clients today often integrates Islamic frameworks with evidence-based therapies.*

Closing Words

Whatever you have lived through, your body's responses are not a sign of weak *iman*. They are a sign of being human. Allah does not abandon those whom He tests.

لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا

“Allah does not burden a soul beyond that it can bear.”

Qur'an, Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:286 (Sahih International translation).

Recovery is possible. Many before you have walked this path. The Prophet (peace be upon him) himself walked through profound loss, persecution, and grief, and remained the most balanced of human beings. He did not do it alone, and neither must you.