

Consumer Handout | Canberra Health Services

Driving anxiety after road trauma

Driving anxiety is an overwhelming fear of driving or having a panic attack while driving. This can cause you to limit or avoid driving altogether.

Driving anxiety can cause you to feel anxious and scared when you are a driver or passenger in a car. These feelings may happen outside of the car too.

It is normal to feel nervous

It can be normal to feel nervous or afraid to be in a car after experiencing a car crash. However, driving anxiety can develop or become worse after a car crash.

This factsheet discusses symptoms and strategies you may find helpful to overcome feelings of driving anxiety.

Symptoms you might experience or feel:

- Fear and panic, this may be excessive, intense and/or persistent.
- An overwhelming urge to get away from the car
- Sweating or nausea
- Feeling disorientated or confused
- Shortness of breath
- Dizziness or feeling faint
- Raised heart rate, chest pain
- Rapid breathing – sometimes to the point of hyperventilating
- Wanting to avoid things which remind you of the crash, such as where the crash took place, peak hour traffic times or modes of transport
- Thoughts or flashbacks of having a crash or something bad happening when in the car

What can I do to reduce driving anxiety?

Talk about what happened

It is normal to feel afraid or anxious after a traumatic incident like a car crash, as you can feel more alert. It is OK to acknowledge you don't feel safe or comfortable driving. Talking to friends, family or colleagues you trust may help you to process and understand more about what you are feeling.

Identify triggers

It can be helpful to understand what is causing your anxiety (also called 'triggers'). There can be a range of triggers, such as certain road conditions, driving in heavy traffic or behind a truck.



The more you are aware of your triggers, the more you can come up with strategies to cope with them.

Practice relaxation

Learn some relaxation techniques and practice these when you are not driving to lower your stress and calm your anxiety. You can do this by using breathing or mindfulness exercises or by doing an activity that relaxes you. An exercise you could try is naming 5 things you can see, 4 things you can touch, 3 things you can hear, 2 things you can smell and 1 you can taste.

If you experience an increase in anxiety while you are driving, take a few deep breaths and relax any tension felt in your body. This will tell your body that you are safe and help you stay present and focused while driving.

Change your behaviour

One way to assist in reducing driving anxiety is to list the situations you find difficult, from least to most. Then, try to do each thing on your list slowly over time. This helps you to work towards driving again in small, manageable steps. Below is an example of situations from least difficult to more difficult. The goal is to gradually work through the list in manageable steps.

- Sit in the car with a loved one for support.
- Sit in the car by yourself.
- Sit in the car with the engine running.
- Drive a short distance up the road, park the car and walk back.
- Drive round the block.
- Take a longer drive with another person for support.
- Take the same drive without someone else.
- Take a longer drive.
- Keep making the drive longer until you feel comfortable.
- Take a drive on an unfamiliar road.

Reward yourself each time you do a step and are ready to try the next challenge.

Where to get help

If driving anxiety continues to be a problem for you, organise a health check with your General Practitioner (GP) who can give you advice and how to proceed including seeing a counsellor or psychologist. You may be able to see a counsellor through your Third-Party insurer.

Support services

- ACT Trauma Service - (02) 5124 3293 ACTTraumaService@act.gov.au
- The Canberra Hospital Social Work Department – (02) 5124 2316
acthealthtchsocialwork@act.gov.au
- Grief Australia - grief.org.au/ 1800 642 066
- Reach Out - au.reachout.com/
- Lifeline - 13 11 14 lifeline.org.au/



For more information scan the QR code or go to:

<https://www.canberrahealthservices.act.gov.au/resources/health-information-sheets-search?collection=actssict%7Esp-information-sheet-finder&query=&f.Categories%7Ccategories=Emergency+and+trauma>



Road Trauma Support WA, Injury Matters 2024, adapted by Canberra Health Services with permission.



Acknowledgement of Country

Canberra Health Services acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as traditional custodians of the ACT and recognises any other people or families with connection to the lands of the ACT and region. We acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and contribution to the life of this region.



© Australian Capital Territory, Canberra 2026



Accessibility call (02) 5124 0000



Interpreter call 131 450

[canberrahealthservices.act.gov.au/accessibility](https://www.canberrahealthservices.act.gov.au/accessibility)

