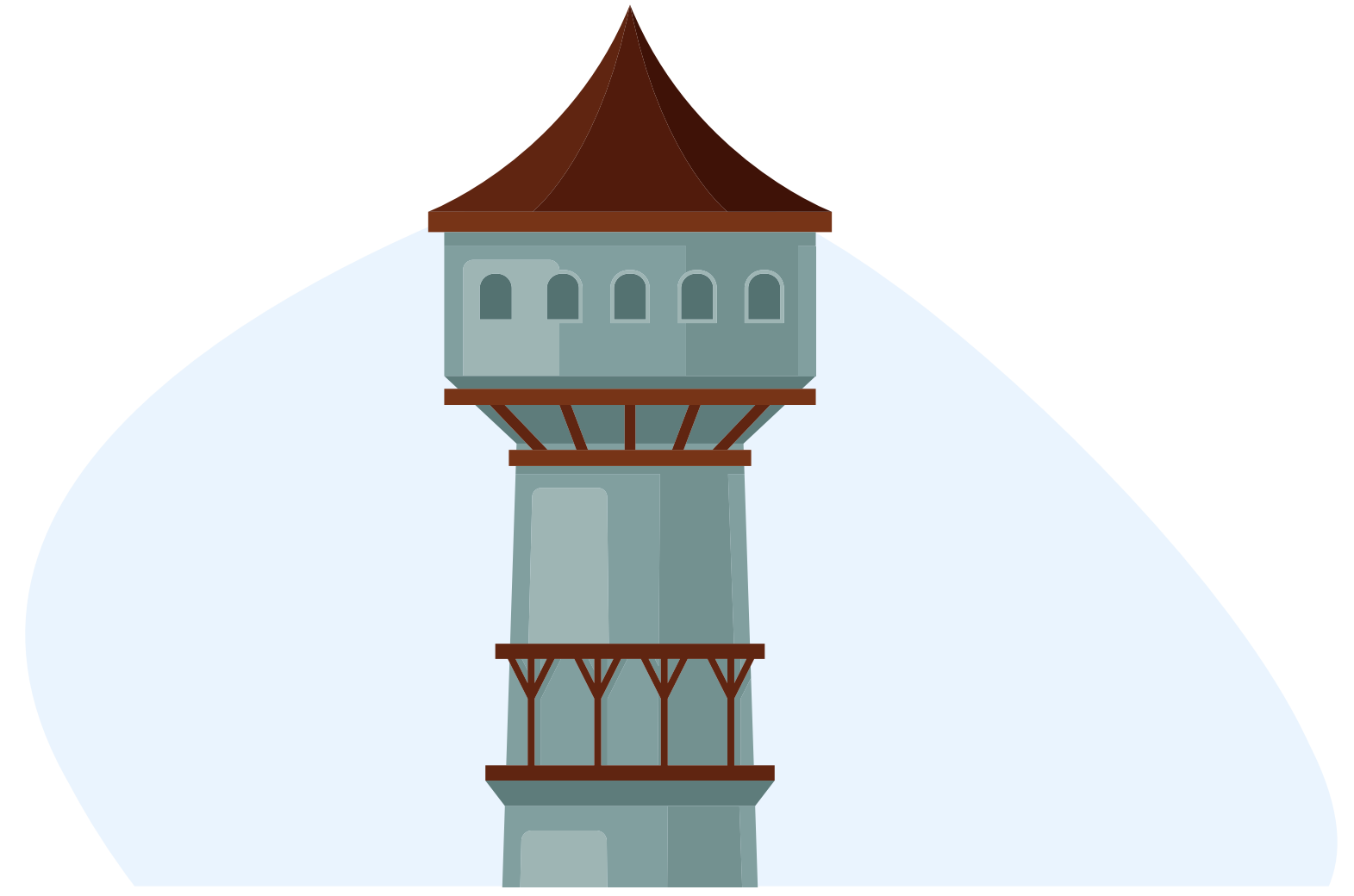


Factsheet

METAPHOR OF THE GUARD TOWER



After experiencing a particularly difficult event in which you feared for your life or for that of another, it's common for so-called post-traumatic symptoms to appear in the months following the event. Indeed, our brain has experienced the fragility of life. That's why it may get blocked on the experience. It's then always on the alert, ready to react to survive. We're going to try to understand how this works.

We can distinguish two parts of the brain, the so-called rational brain and the emotional brain.

1 Rational brain

In everyday life, the rational brain helps us to understand and analyze what's happening to us. In particular, it helps us to perform rational actions to achieve our different goals in life, whether small (making a meal) or complex (holding down a job). We consider the rational brain to be like the supervisory staff of a guard tower.

2 The emotional brain

The emotional brain allows us to understand that there's a danger and it can trigger one of three survival reactions (flight, fight or freeze) almost immediately, without the rational brain being involved at all. On the other hand, it can't analyze or be objective. We consider it to be like the guard tower alarm system as it's very sensitive.

The alarm is therefore faster than the guards, letting them know that there's a potential danger very quickly, but it doesn't offer a close analysis of the situation.

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In everyday life, the alarm is triggered from time to time (e.g., when you see something that appears « dangerous »). The guard tower supervisors then analyze the danger and decide which actions to take. Once it seems safe, the alarm is switched off and we return to a normal situation. This is what happens for example when you see a hosepipe in a garden and you think it's a snake. At first, we're very afraid, we run away or we're paralyzed, but then the rational brain starts to function and we realize that it's a hosepipe and go back to our normal state.

In the case of a traumatic event, the alarm isn't switched off because the danger is too important. Except that once the event is finished, the alarm begins to malfunction and switches on for the slightest thing*. The brain no longer knows that it's safe. The supervisors in the guard tower are then constantly on alert. They're soon overwhelmed by repeated alarms and can no longer make suitable decisions or go back to the original state. Imagine working in a context where an extremely strong, deafening alarm bell is constantly switching on. In this context, it's common to see cognitive disorders appear, such as difficulty concentrating.

That's what happens when you experience a traumatic event. The good news is that there are methods and tools that help our alarm to work as it did in the past! You can find many tools and exercises to try on this website. But if the situation doesn't get better after a month, then you can go and see a professional.

*These things are actually triggers, details that remind us of the nature of the traumatic event, such as a colour we saw or a smell we experienced at the time of the trauma.

