

Posttraumatic stress disorder

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a set of reactions that can develop in people who have experienced or witnessed an event that threatens their life or safety (or that of others around them) and leads to feelings of intense fear, helplessness or horror. This could be a car or other serious accident, physical or sexual assault, war or torture, or natural disaster such as bushfire or flood.

Other life-changing situations such as being retrenched, getting divorced or the expected death of an ill family member are very distressing, and may cause serious mental health problems, but are not events that can cause PTSD.

Anyone can develop PTSD following a traumatic event but people are at greater risk if:

- The event involved physical or sexual assault
- They have had repeated traumatic experiences such as sexual abuse or living in a war zone
- They have suffered from PTSD in the past.

Signs and symptoms

People with PTSD often experience feelings of panic or extreme fear, which may resemble what was felt during the traumatic event. A person with PTSD has three main types of difficulties:

- **Reliving the traumatic event** – through unwanted and recurring memories and vivid nightmares. There may be intense emotional or physical reactions when reminded of the event. These can include sweating, heart palpitations or panic.
- **Being overly alert or 'wound up'** – sleeping difficulties, irritability, lack of concentration, becoming easily startled and constantly being on the lookout for signs of danger.
- **Avoiding reminders of the event and feeling emotionally numb** – deliberately avoiding activities, places, people, thoughts or feelings associated with the event. People may also lose interest in day-to-day activities, feel cut off and detached from friends and family, or feel flat and numb.

People with PTSD can also have what are termed 'dissociative experiences', which are characterised by statements such as:

- 'It was as though I wasn't even there.'
- 'Time was standing still.'
- 'I felt like I was watching things happen from above.'
- 'I can't remember most of what happened.'

A health practitioner may diagnose PTSD if a person has a number of symptoms in each of the three areas for a month or more, which:

- Lead to significant distress, **or**
- Impact on their ability to work and study, their relationships and day-to-day life.

It is not unusual for people with PTSD to experience other mental health problems at the same time. These may have developed directly in response to the traumatic event or have followed the PTSD. These additional problems are more likely to occur if PTSD has persisted for a long time. Up to 80 per cent of people who have long-standing PTSD develop additional problems, most commonly depression and anxiety. Many also start misusing alcohol or drugs as a way of coping.

Impact of PTSD on relationships and day-to-day life

PTSD can affect a person's ability to work, perform day-to-day activities or relate to their family and friends. A person with PTSD can often seem disinterested or distant as they try not to think or feel in order to block out painful memories. They may stop participating in family life, ignore offers of help or become irritable. This can lead to loved ones feeling shut out.

It is important to remember that these behaviours are part of the problem. People with PTSD need the support of family and friends but may not know that they need help. There are many ways you can help someone with PTSD. Further information and resources are available at the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health.

Risky alcohol and drug use

People commonly use alcohol or other drugs to blunt the emotional pain that they are experiencing. Alcohol and drugs may help block out painful memories in the short term, but they get in the way of recovery.

When to get help

A person who has experienced a traumatic event should seek professional help if they:

- Don't feel any better after two weeks
- Feel highly anxious or distressed
- Have reactions to the traumatic event that are interfering with home, work and relationships
- Are thinking of harming themselves or someone else.

Some of the signs that a problem may be developing are:

- Being constantly on edge or irritable
- Having difficulty performing tasks at home or at work
- Being unable to respond emotionally to others
- Being unusually busy to avoid issues
- Using alcohol, drugs or gambling to cope
- Having severe sleeping difficulties.

Support is important for recovery

Many people experience some of the symptoms of PTSD in the first couple of weeks after a traumatic event, but most recover on their own or with the help of family and friends. For this reason, treatment does not usually start until about two weeks after a traumatic experience.

It is important during those first few days and weeks after a traumatic event to get whatever help is needed. This might include information and access to people and resources that can assist recovery. Support from family and friends may be all that is needed. Otherwise, a doctor is the best place to start, to get further help.

A range of treatments

If problems persist after two weeks, a doctor or a mental health professional may discuss starting treatment. Effective treatments are available. Most involve psychological treatment but medication can also be prescribed. Generally, it's best to start with psychological treatment rather than use medication as the first and only solution to the problem.

The cornerstone of treatment for PTSD involves confronting the traumatic memory and working through thoughts and beliefs associated with the experience. Trauma-focussed treatments can:

- Reduce PTSD symptoms
- Lessen anxiety and depression
- Improve a person's quality of life.
- They are also effective for people who have experienced prolonged or repeated traumatic events, but more time may be needed.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- A mental health specialist, such as a psychiatrist, psychologist or social worker, with experience in PTSD
- Your local community health centre

Things to remember

- PTSD develops in some people after they experience or witness an event that threatens their life or safety, or that of others around them.
- Symptoms include vivid memories, feeling constantly on edge and avoiding reminders of the event.
- It is common for people to have some of the symptoms of PTSD in the first few days after the traumatic event. Most will recover by themselves or with the support of family and friend. Others may need professional help.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health

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