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## Torture and trauma

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### Summary

- About seven out of 10 refugees in Australia have been tortured or gone through some kind of war-related trauma.
  - Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) develops in some people after experiencing a frightening event.
  - Some survivors of torture and trauma live with their memories for years, or even for the rest of their lives.
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About seven out of 10 refugees in Australia have been tortured or gone through some kind of war-related trauma. Some forms of torture (such as beatings, amputation, rape and burns) harm the body and cause lasting scars. Other torture methods are painful, but don't cause scarring, such as starvation or being forced to stand for long periods of time. Examples of trauma include imprisonment, seeing the rape or murder of a loved one, or a dangerous journey to freedom such as an attack by pirates at sea.

Some people who have been tortured develop post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The symptoms of PTSD include flashbacks and nightmares about the event that are so clear they seem real.

### Symptoms

People who have been tortured can have a range of symptoms, including:

- Headaches
- Shaking or trembling muscles
- Hearing loss
- Vision problems
- Sleeping problems
- Anxiety attacks
- Nervousness
- Irritability
- Sexual problems
- Depression
- Aggression
- Suicidal thoughts
- Some survivors of torture experience long term pain from soft tissue injuries.

### Avoiding the memories

A person who has been tortured may try hard to avoid anything that reminds them of their traumatic experience. This may include:

- Keeping thoughts and feelings separate, and choosing only to think instead of feel.
  - They may 'disconnect' from the world around them and seem to be mostly daydreaming.
  - Since many torturers are medical professionals, the person may stay away from hospitals, clinics, doctors, dentists and nurses.
  - They may get anxious if they see or experience something that reminds them of their trauma, even if that object or activity isn't dangerous or threatening in itself.
  - The person may try to avoid crowds, public places, authority figures and anyone who wears a uniform.
  - Some may stay home as much as they can, and avoid travelling and meeting new people.
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- Harmful ways of coping may include alcohol or drug abuse.

### **Post traumatic stress disorder**

A condition known as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) develops in some people after going through a frightening event. The symptoms of PTSD include:

- Flashbacks, intense memories and nightmares that are so vivid, it feels like the trauma is happening all over again
- Sleep problems, such as insomnia
- Withdrawal from people and situations
- Loss of interest in life
- Increased anxiety and watchfulness
- Nervousness
- Being easily frightened or startled
- Feelings of helplessness or hopelessness
- Irritability
- Aggression and anger
- Severe depression, or deadening of emotions
- Loss of full range of emotions
- Problems with concentration
- Problems with learning new skills
- Memory problems
- Feeling like they have no future
- Problems with close relationships
- Loss of appetite
- Unexplained skin rashes, headaches, stomach upsets and other complaints that don't seem to have a physical cause
- Thoughts of suicide.

### **Symptoms in children**

The symptoms of torture and trauma in a child depend on the child's age, development and their experience. Generally, a child who has experienced torture or trauma may show symptoms including:

- Having the same nightmare over and over
- Confusing reality with fantasy
- Inability to trust others, including their parents
- Feeling afraid of things, people or situations that don't present any threat
- Destroying toys
- Repetitive play
- Agitated, anxious behaviour
- Problems at school, including antisocial behaviour
- Stuttering and speech problems (a child who can't yet talk may show their stress in drawings or play).

### **Common complications**

Some survivors of torture and trauma live with their memories for years, or even for the rest of their lives. They remember the event in daydreams and nightmares, while certain things (such as objects, situations or people) remind them so much of their trauma, they experience strong physical and emotional reactions of stress, terror, grief and despair. Without treatment, survivors of torture and trauma can have ongoing problems including:

- Inability to trust others
- Inability to form close relationships

- Problems with school or work
- Anxiety disorders, such as phobias or panic attacks
- Severe depression
- Problems with alcohol or drug abuse.

### Support services

There are nation-wide support services for survivors of torture and trauma. Treatment offered includes:

- Health professionals, for treatment of physical complaints
- Psychological services including counselling, stress management and relaxation techniques
- Interpreters.

### Where to get help

- The Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture Tel. (03) 9388 0022
- AUSTCARE Victoria Tel. (03) 9663 1600
- The Australian Psychological Society Tel. (03) 8662 3300
- Australasian Critical Incident Stress Association Tel. (03) 9663 2333
- Refugee Council of Australia Tel. (02) 9660 5300
- Australian Transcultural Mental Health Network Tel. (02) 9840 3333

### Things to remember

- About seven out of 10 refugees in Australia have been tortured or gone through some kind of war-related trauma.
- Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) develops in some people after experiencing a frightening event.
- Some survivors of torture and trauma live with their memories for years, or even for the rest of their lives.

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