



Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a particular set of reactions that can develop in people who have been through a traumatic event. That is, they have experienced or witnessed an event which threatened their life or safety, or that of others around them, and led to feelings of intense fear, helplessness or horror.

This can be a car or other serious accident, physical or sexual assault, war or torture, or disasters such as bushfires or floods. 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 mental health problems, but are not events that can cause PTSD.

Signs and symptoms

People with PTSD often experience feelings of panic or extreme fear, which may resemble those sensations that were felt during the traumatic event. A person with PTSD has four main types of difficulties.

- 1. Re-living the traumatic event:** Through unwanted and recurring memories, often in the form of vivid images and nightmares. There may be intense emotional or physical reactions, such as sweating, heart palpitations or panic when reminded of the event.

- 2. 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.
- 3. Avoiding reminders of the event:** Deliberately avoiding activities, places, people, thoughts or feelings associated with the event because they bring back painful memories.
- 4. Feeling emotionally numb:** Losing interest in day-to-day activities, feeling cut off and detached from friends and family, or feeling emotionally flat and numb.

A health professional may diagnose PTSD if a person has a number of symptoms in each of these areas for one month or more. The symptoms usually lead to significant distress and interfere with the person's ability to work or study, as well as his/her social relationships.

It's not unusual for people with PTSD to experience other mental health conditions at the same time. These may have developed directly in response to the traumatic event or have followed the PTSD. These additional problems – most commonly depression, anxiety and alcohol or drug use – are more likely to occur if PTSD has persisted for a long time.

Talk to your doctor or another health professional at any time if you feel very distressed or your reactions are interfering with your relationships, work or study and ability to participate in day-to-day activities.

How common is PTSD and who experiences it?

Anyone can develop PTSD following a traumatic event, but people are at greater risk if the event involved deliberate harm (such as physical or sexual assault) or they have had repeated traumatic experiences (such as childhood sexual abuse or living in a war zone). Apart from the event itself, risk factors for developing PTSD include a past history of trauma or previous mental health problems, as well as ongoing stressful life events after the trauma and an absence of social supports.

Around one million Australians experience PTSD in any one year, and 12 per cent of Australians will experience PTSD in their lifetime.¹ Serious accidents are one of the leading causes of PTSD in Australia.

What treatments are available for PTSD?

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. Even though formal treatment may not commence, it is important during those first few days and weeks to get whatever help is needed. This might include simple information and advice on self care. Support from family and friends is very important for most people.

Trying, as far as possible, to minimise other stressful life experiences allows the person to focus more on his/her recovery.

If a person feels very distressed at any time after a traumatic event, he/she should talk to a doctor or other health professional. If a person experiences symptoms of PTSD that persist beyond two weeks, a doctor or a mental health professional may recommend starting treatment for PTSD.



Effective treatments are available. Most involve psychological treatment (talking therapy), but medication can also be prescribed in some cases. 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-focused psychological treatments can reduce PTSD symptoms, lessen anxiety and depression, and 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 in these circumstances.

Drug treatments are not recommended within four weeks of symptoms appearing unless the severity of the person's distress cannot be managed by psychological means alone.

Helping yourself to recover from PTSD

There are also many ways in which the person can assist in his/her recovery. It's important to remember that recovery is not something that happens all at once, nor is it straightforward. Symptoms of PTSD can be manageable for a while, then return at times of stress. Anniversary dates, news coverage of similar events or going through a major change like a new job or relationship breakdown can lead to problems coming back or getting worse for a time. For most people, however, the following "DOs and DON'Ts" will help:

Do

- ✓ Spend time with people who care
- ✓ Give yourself time
- ✓ Find out about the impact of trauma and what to expect
- ✓ Try to keep a routine going (e.g. work, study)
- ✓ Return to normal activities
- ✓ Talk about how you feel or what happened when ready
- ✓ Do things that help you relax
- ✓ Do things that you enjoy

Other tips to promote recovery

- Set realistic goals – don't take on too much, but try to find goals that keep you motivated.
- Review and reward progress – notice even the small steps.
- Talk about the ups and downs of recovery with friends, family and the health professionals involved in your care.
- Have a plan to maintain positive changes and plans to deal with times of stress or reminders of the trauma.

Don't

- ✗ Use alcohol or drugs to try to cope
- ✗ Keep yourself busy and work too much
- ✗ Engage in stressful family or work situations
- ✗ Withdraw from family and friends
- ✗ Stop yourself from doing things that you enjoy
- ✗ Avoid talking about what happened
- ✗ Take risks

Anniversaries and other stressful times

Anniversaries of traumatic events like the September 11 terrorist attacks in America, a battle in the Vietnam War, major bushfires and floods, and tragedies may trigger some unpleasant emotions in people, even if they were not directly affected or involved. Seeing images in the media again, or recalling your reaction at the time, may be upsetting. You may also find other times difficult, especially when you are experiencing other stress in your life such as financial, work, health, or relationship problems. At those times, it is especially important that you look after yourself in the ways discussed in this fact sheet.

Tips to help you cope with anniversaries and other difficult times

- Recognise that an anniversary can be a difficult period. Give yourself permission to feel some distress; it is perfectly normal and understandable.
- Try to limit your exposure to media coverage about the anniversary, as well as your conversations about it with other people.
- Keep your normal routine going, but allow yourself some time out if you need it.
- Plan your days and build in plenty of relaxing and enjoyable activities.
- Spend time with other people – especially those you care about – and don't be afraid to ask for support if you need it.
- Look after yourself. Get plenty of rest and exercise and eat sensibly; cut back on stimulants such as tea, coffee, chocolate, cola and cigarettes.
- If you drink alcohol, keep an eye on how much you drink.
- Try to relax. Listen to soothing music, go for a walk, take a hot bath, or do whatever works for you.

For more information about taking care of yourself after a disaster (e.g. floods, fires, cyclones), see *beyondblue's* 'Looking after yourself and your family after a disaster'. This free booklet was produced in collaboration with the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health, Australian Red Cross, and the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement and is available at beyondblue.org.au or by calling 1300 22 4636.

How to help someone recover from PTSD

As a family member, carer or friend, you should be involved, wherever possible, in the assessment and treatment of the person with PTSD. PTSD often impacts on the whole family and it is important that your needs and perspective are taken into account throughout treatment. This can only be done if you think it is appropriate and with the approval of the person who has experienced the traumatic event.

If you are finding the situation very distressing, you may seek treatment for these issues in your own right. It can be very difficult to watch someone you care about struggle with the distress caused by a traumatic event. You may find yourself worrying constantly about the person's wellbeing and feel helpless when confronted with his/her emotions.

People with PTSD can often seem disinterested or distant as they try not to think or feel in order to block out painful memories, so you may feel shut out. They may stop participating in family life, ignore your offers of help or become irritable. It is important to remember that this behaviour is part of the problem; it's not about you. The person with PTSD probably needs your support, but doesn't know what he/she needs or how to ask for help. There are many ways you can help:

- Listen and show that you care. Sometimes, people say things that are meant to be helpful, but instead just leave the person feeling more isolated and misunderstood. Examples of such unhelpful



statements are "You just need to get on with your life" and "I know how you feel".

- You can encourage your family member to share their thoughts and feelings about what is happening to them. Remember that you are not the person's therapist and don't have to find solutions. You also do not have to hear all the details of the trauma – in many cases, it is best not to. If necessary, let the person know that you do not feel strong enough to hear all the details, while at the same time reassuring the person about your support and understanding.
- Remember that providing support doesn't have to be complicated. It often involves small things like spending time together, having a cup of tea, chatting about day-to-day life or giving the person a hug.
- Some people find it helpful to have time to themselves after a traumatic experience. If this is the case for the person, try to give him/her some space and time alone when requested. Encourage a balance between time spent alone and time spent with others.
- Encourage your family member to seek help and stay focused on

recovery. The person may not realise that he/she needs help or may find it hard to admit that help is needed. The person may be worried about being vulnerable or having to talk about what happened. Getting professional help can sometimes be difficult, as it often means facing painful memories. Commenting on positive changes or small steps taken by the person can also help him/her to remain hopeful about recovery.

- Look after yourself. This may be the most important thing you can do to help your family member. Supporting someone who has been through a traumatic event can take a toll on you, sometimes so much that your own health can be affected and you can no longer help the person effectively. It is crucial that you take time out and reach out to friends and other supportive people in your community.

For more information see *beyondblue's* free booklet 'A guide for carers', available at www.beyondblue.org.au or by calling 1300 22 4636.

Where to find help

Most people who have experienced a traumatic event will go through times when they find things difficult or challenging and it is important to understand the benefits of professional assistance. Don't think you need to be struggling or suffering severely to access help.

People who have been through a traumatic event may, as a result of that event, come into contact with various help services. For example, when a disaster occurs, governments activate their recovery arrangements and provide a range of support services to assist affected individuals and communities, including access to counselling and mental health services. If such assistance is available, it's a good idea to utilise it. However, there are many other services and health professionals who can assist.

A **General Practitioner (GP)** is a good person with whom to discuss your concerns in the first instance. A good GP can:

- make a diagnosis
- discuss available treatments
- work with the person to draw up a Mental Health Treatment Plan so he or she can get a Medicare rebate for psychological treatment
- provide brief counselling or, in some cases, talking therapy
- prescribe medication
- refer a person to a mental health specialist such as a psychologist or psychiatrist.

It is recommended that people consult their regular GP or another GP in the same clinic, as medical information is shared within a practice.

When seeking psychological therapy, mental health practitioners trained in trauma-focused psychological therapy should be the first choice. Most commonly, mental health practitioners with this kind of training are psychologists, although psychiatrists and clinical social workers may also have received such training.

Psychologists are health professionals who provide psychological therapies (talking therapies) such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and interpersonal therapy (IPT). Clinical psychologists specialise in the assessment, diagnosis and treatment of mental health problems. Psychologists and clinical psychologists are not doctors and cannot prescribe medication in Australia.

Psychiatrists are doctors who have undergone further training to specialise in mental health. They can make medical and psychiatric assessments, conduct medical tests, provide therapy and prescribe medication. Psychiatrists often use psychological treatments such as cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT), interpersonal therapy (IPT) and/or medication. If the anxiety is severe and hospital admission is required, a psychiatrist will be in charge of the person's treatment.

The cost of getting treatment from a health professional varies. However, in the same way that people can get a Medicare rebate when they see a doctor, they can also get part or all of the consultation fee subsidised when they see a mental health professional for treatment of anxiety or depression. See *beyondblue's* 'Getting help – How much does it cost?' fact sheet at www.beyondblue.org.au

For a list of General Practitioners, clinical psychologists, clinical psychologists, mental health nurses, social workers and occupational therapists with expertise in treating mental health problems, visit www.beyondblue.org.au or call the *beyondblue* support service on 1300 22 4636.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2008). *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results, 2007* (4326.0). Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Where to find more information

beyondblue
www.beyondblue.org.au
1300 22 4636

Information on depression and anxiety, available treatments and where to get help. You can visit www.beyondblue.org.au/anxietysupport for a list of services specifically for people experiencing anxiety, their friends and family. These services include national and state-based information and referral lines, face-to-face treatment and support services, and links to online information, support and treatment.

Lifeline
www.lifeline.org.au
13 11 14

Access to crisis support, suicide prevention and mental health support services.

mindhealthconnect
www.mindhealthconnect.org.au

Access to trusted, relevant mental health care services, online programs and resources.



facebook.com/beyondblue



twitter.com/beyondblue