

# POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)

## How does PTSD start?

PTSD can start after any traumatic event - that is one where we experience being at risk, in danger, our life is threatened or where we see other people in those situations.

Some typical traumatic events would be:

- Serious accidents (road traffic collisions involving vehicles or pedestrians).
- Violent personal assault (physical attack, abuse, mugging).
- Being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness (tumour) or life changing injury (spinal).

## When does PTSD start?

The symptoms of PTSD can start immediately after a traumatic event or after a delay of weeks or months. They usually appear within 6 months of the traumatic event.

## What does PTSD feel like?

Many people feel grief-stricken, depressed, anxious, guilty and angry after a traumatic experience. Along with these understandable emotions there are three main types of symptoms:-

### Flashbacks & Nightmares

You find yourself reliving the event. This can happen both as a 'flashback' during the day and as nightmares when you are asleep. These can be so realistic that you feel you are living through the experience again.

Whilst you see it in your mind, you may also feel the emotions and physical sensations of what happened e.g. fear, sweating, smells, sounds, pain.

Ordinary things can trigger off flashbacks if you associate them together with what happened to you e.g. the sound of a vehicle, the weather, a siren

## **Avoidance & Numbing**

To avoid reliving your experience you may choose to distract yourself and keep your mind busy by doing a hobby, or working hard and long hours. You probably avoid places and people that remind you of the trauma and try not to talk about it.

You may deal with your feelings and try to block out the pain they cause by becoming emotionally numb to feeling anything at all. You have less contact with other people and they then find it difficult to communicate back to you, at home or at work.

## **Being 'on guard'**

You find it hard to relax as you have to stay alert all the time in case of any pending dangerous circumstances. This is called 'hyper vigilance'. You feel anxious, irritable, jumpy and find it hard to sleep. This will be noticed by friends, family and work colleagues.

## **Other symptoms**

Emotional reactions to stress are often accompanied by:

- headaches
- feelings of panic and fear
- pounding heartbeats
- muscle aches and pains
- diarrhoea
- depression
- drinking too much alcohol
- using drugs incorrectly (including painkillers)

## **Why are traumatic events so shocking?**

They make us question our belief in life and the expectancy that it should be fair, safe and secure. A traumatic experience makes it clear that we are at risk and may die at any time as a result of that type of event. The symptoms of PTSD are part of a normal reaction to narrowly-avoided death.

## **Does everyone get PTSD after a traumatic experience?**

No - but a lot of people will have the symptoms of post-traumatic stress for the first month or so after the event. These feelings, emotions and

experiences can help you to understand the event you have been through. After a few weeks most people slowly come to terms with what happened and their symptoms start to reduce.

However some people find it hard to come to terms with what has happened and their symptoms persist. These are not unusual symptoms but can become a problem when they go on for too long and the person develops PTSD.

### **What makes PTSD worse?**

The more traumatic the experience you go through makes it more likely that you could develop PTSD. The most traumatic events:

- Are sudden and unexpected (e.g. accidents and assaults).
- Go on for a long time (meaning you are involved with it for a lengthy period).
- Are when you are trapped and can't get away (e.g. stuck in a vehicle after an accident or cornered by an assailant).
- Cause many deaths or mutilating injuries (e.g. multiple vehicle accidents).
- Involve family / friends especially children.

If you are continually exposed to situations where you experience stress and uncertainty this can make it difficult or impossible for your symptoms to improve.

### **What about ordinary 'stress'?**

Most people say they feel 'stressed' at some time but this may mean different things e.g.

- Our inner sense of worry, feeling tense or feeling burdened.
- The problems in our life that are giving us these feelings. This could be work, relationships, financial etc.

Unlike PTSD, these are part of normal everyday life, but can also give rise to anxiety, depression, tiredness and headaches.

### **Why does PTSD happen?**

We don't know for certain but may be related to either psychological or physical changes:-

## Psychological

We usually remember things very clearly when we are frightened. This can be distressing but can help us understand what's happened and help us to survive in the longer term. Replays of what happened or re-enacting the event are seen as *flashbacks*. They make us think over what happened so we could be better prepared if it happened again.

**Avoidance and Numbing.** These keep the flashbacks or remembering down to a manageable level as it is distressing to continually relive a traumatic event.

**Being 'On Guard'.** This means we should be able to react quickly if another traumatic event happens. It can also give us energy that's needed after an accident or crisis.

## Physical

Adrenaline is a hormone produced by our bodies when we are under stress. It 'pumps up' the body to prepare it for action. When the stress disappears, the level of adrenaline should go back to normal. However, in PTSD, the memories of the trauma may keep the levels of adrenaline high and this will make a person tense, irritable and unable to relax or sleep well.

The *hippocampus* is a part of the brain that processes memories. High levels of adrenaline can stop it from working properly – like 'blowing a fuse'. This means the flashbacks and nightmares continue because the memories of the trauma can't be processed.

If the stress goes away and the adrenaline levels return to normal the brain undergoes a natural healing process to repair the damage itself and the disturbing memories can be processed and the flashbacks and nightmares will slowly disappear.

## How do I know when I've got over a traumatic experience?

When you:

- Can think about the event without becoming distressed
- Do not feel constantly under threat, panicky and anxious
- Do not think about it at inappropriate times.

## Why is PTSD often not recognised?

Many people find it difficult to talk about upsetting events and feelings and choose to avoid this exposure. We may not want to admit to symptoms because we don't want to be thought of as weak or mentally unstable.

People with PTSD often find it easier to talk about the other problems that go along with it - headache, sleep problems, irritability, depression, tension, substance abuse, family or work-related problems to try and avoid exploring the cause of these symptoms.

## How can I tell if I have PTSD?

Have you experienced a traumatic event of the sort described at the start of this leaflet? If you have, do you:

- Have vivid memories, flashbacks or nightmares?
- Avoid things that remind you of the event?
- Feel emotionally numb at times?
- Feel irritable and constantly on edge, but can't see why?
- Eat more than usual, or use more drink or drugs than usual?
- Feel out of control of your mood?
- Find it more difficult to get on with other people?
- Have to keep very busy to cope?
- Feel depressed or exhausted?

If it is **less than 6 weeks** since the traumatic event and these experiences are slowly improving, they may be part of the normal process of adjustment.

If it is **more than 6 weeks** since the event, and these experiences don't seem to be getting better, it is worth talking it over with the Clinical Nurse Specialist who can offer you counselling or refer you back to your GP.

## Children and PTSD

PTSD can develop at any age. Younger children may have upsetting dreams of the actual trauma which then change into nightmares of monsters. They often relive the trauma in their play. For example, a child involved in a serious road traffic accident might re-enact the crash with toy cars, over and over again.

They may lose interest in things they used to enjoy. They may find it hard to believe that they will live long enough to grow up.

They often complain of stomach-aches and headaches.

## **How can PTSD be helped?**

### Helping yourself

#### **DO .....**

- keep life as normal as possible
- get back to your usual routine
- talk about what happened to someone you trust
- try relaxation exercises
- go back to work
- eat and exercise regularly
- go back to where the traumatic event happened
- take time to be with family and friends
- be careful when driving – your concentration may be poor
- be more careful generally – accidents are more likely at this time
- speak to a doctor
- expect to get better

#### **DO NOT.....**

- beat yourself up about it - PTSD symptoms are not a sign of weakness but they are a normal reaction, of normal people, to terrifying experiences
- bottle up your feelings - if you have developed PTSD symptoms, don't keep it to yourself because treatment is usually very successful
- avoid talking about it
- expect the memories to go away immediately; they may be with you for quite some time
- expect too much of yourself - cut yourself a bit of slack while you adjust to what has happened
- stay away from other people
- drink lots of alcohol or coffee or smoke more
- get overtired
- miss meals
- take holidays on your own

## **What can interfere with getting better?**

You may find that other people may:

- not let you talk about it
- avoid you
- be angry with you

- think of you as weak
- blame you

These are all ways in which other people protect themselves from thinking about gruesome or horrifying events. It won't help you because it doesn't give you the chance to talk over what has happened to you.

A traumatic event can put you into a trance-like state which makes the situation seem unreal or bewildering. It is harder to deal with if you can't remember what happened, can't put it into words, or can't make sense of it.

## **How can PTSD be treated?**

### **Psychotherapy**

All the effective psychotherapies for PTSD focus on the traumatic experience – or experiences - rather than your past life. You cannot change or forget what has happened but you can learn to think differently about it, about the world, and about your life.

You need to be able to remember what happened, as fully as possible, without being overwhelmed by fear and distress. These therapies help you to put words to your experiences. By remembering the event, going over it and making sense of it, your mind can do its normal job, of storing the memories away, and moving on to other things.

When you start to feel safer, and more in control of your feelings, you won't need to avoid the memories as much. You will be able to only think about them when you want to, rather than having them erupt into your mind spontaneously.

All these treatments should all be given by PTSD specialists. The sessions should be at least weekly, with the same therapist, for 8-12 weeks. Although sessions will usually last around an hour, they can sometimes last up to 90 minutes.

### **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy**

(CBT) is a talking treatment which can help us to understand how 'habits of thinking' can make the PTSD worse - or even cause it. CBT can help you change these 'extreme' ways of thinking, which can also help you to feel better and to behave differently.

## **EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation & Reprocessing)**

This is a technique which uses eye movements to help the brain to process flashbacks and to make sense of the traumatic experience. It may sound odd, but it has been shown to work. This should only be delivered by a specialist practitioner.

## **Group Therapy**

This involves meeting with a group of other people who have been through the same, or a similar traumatic event. It can be easier to talk about what happened if you are with other people who have been through a similar experience.

## **Medication**

SSRI antidepressant tablets will both reduce the strength of PTSD symptoms and relieve any depression that is also present. They will need to be prescribed by a doctor.

If these medications don't work for you then other tricyclic and MAOI antidepressants may still be helpful.

## **FOR FRIENDS, RELATIVES & COLLEAGUES**

### **DO .....**

- watch out for any changes in behaviour – poor performance at work, lateness, taking sick leave, minor accidents
- watch for anger, irritability, depression, lack of interest, lack of concentration
- take time to allow a trauma survivor to tell their story
- ask general questions
- let them talk, don't interrupt the flow or come back with your own experiences

### **DO NOT .....**

- tell a survivor you know how they feel – you don't
- tell a survivor they're lucky to be alive – it doesn't feel like that to them
- minimise their experience – "it's not that bad, surely ..."
- suggest that they just need to "pull themselves together"