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## What is Trauma?

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What do we mean when we use the word 'trauma'?

Trauma is the Greek word for 'wound' and was traditionally used as a term to describe physical injury. These days it more likely to refer to the emotional wounds that leave psychological symptoms following a distressing or life-threatening event.

When most people think about trauma, they tend to think about those who have been exposed to war and combat, ('shell shock'), natural disasters, physical or sexual abuse, terrorism, or catastrophic accidents. These debilitating experiences are often referred to as trauma with a big 'T'. However, a person does not have to undergo an overtly distressing event to be affected by symptoms that can undermine their wellbeing. An accumulation of smaller 'everyday' or less dramatic events can still be traumatic, and are often categorised as trauma with a small 't'.

### What are the symptoms of Trauma?

If you are suffering from trauma you may experience symptoms of anxiety, anger, fear, helplessness, depression or sadness which can in turn effect your relationships and self-esteem. You may also have ongoing problems

with concentration, sleep or physical pain and if these symptoms persist you may receive a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The situations we find traumatic can vary from person to person. There are many different events that might cause someone to develop PTSD, for example:-

- Being involved in a car crash
- Being violently attacked
- Being raped or sexually assaulted
- Being abused, harassed or bullied
- Being kidnapped or held hostage
- Seeing other people hurt or killed, including in the course of your job
- Doing a job where you repeatedly see distressing images or hear details of traumatic events
- Traumatic childbirth, either as a mother or a partner witnessing a traumatic birth
- Extreme violence or war, including military combat
- Surviving a terrorist attack
- Surviving a natural disaster, such as flooding or an earthquake
- Being diagnosed with a life-threatening condition
- Losing someone close to you in particularly upsetting circumstances
- Learning that traumatic events have affected someone close to you (sometimes called secondary trauma)
- Any event in which you fear for your life.

## **How would you know if you have PTSD rather than anxiety?**

Psychological reactions of PTSD can be differentiated from anxiety by a specific complex of symptoms:-

### Reliving aspects of what happened

This can include:-

Vivid flashbacks (feeling like the trauma is happening right now)  
Intrusive thoughts or images  
Nightmares  
Intense distress at real or symbolic reminders of the trauma  
Physical sensations such as pain, sweating, nausea or trembling

### Alertness or feeling on edge

This can include:-

Panicking when reminded of the trauma  
Becoming easily upset or angry  
Extreme alertness, (sometimes called 'hypervigilance')  
Disturbed sleep or a lack of sleep  
Irritability or aggressive behaviour  
Finding it hard to concentrate, even on simple or everyday tasks  
Being jumpy or easily startled  
Self-destructive behaviour or recklessness

### Avoiding feelings or memories

This can include:-

Feeling like you have to keep busy  
Avoiding anything that reminds you of the trauma  
Being unable to remember details of what happened  
Feeling emotionally numb or cut off from your feelings  
Feeling physically numb or detached from your body  
Being unable to express affection  
Using alcohol or drugs to avoid memories

### Difficult beliefs or feelings

This can include:-

Feeling like you can't trust anyone

Feeling like nowhere is safe  
Feeling like nobody understands  
Blaming yourself for what happened  
Overwhelming feelings of anger, sadness, guilt or shame

If you are experiencing symptoms of PTSD, you might find that you have difficulty with some everyday aspects of your life, for example:-

Looking after yourself  
Holding down a job  
Maintaining friendships or relationships  
Remembering things and making decisions  
Your sex drive  
Coping with change  
Being present and simply enjoying your leisure time

## **What are the best ways I can help myself?**

### Get to know your triggers

You might find that certain experiences, situations or people seem to trigger flashbacks or other symptoms. These might include specific reminders of past trauma, such as smells, sounds, words, places or particular types of books or films. Some people find things especially difficult on significant dates, such as the anniversary of a traumatic experience.

### Learn some techniques to deal with Flashbacks

- Focus on your breathing. When you are frightened, you might stop breathing normally. This increases feelings of fear and panic, so it can help to concentrate on breathing slowly in and out while counting to five.
- Carry an object that reminds you of the present. Some people find it helpful to touch or look at a particular object during a flashback. This might be something you decide to carry in your pocket or bag, or something that you have with you anyway, such as a keyring or a piece of jewellery.

- Tell yourself that you are safe. It may help to tell yourself that the trauma is over and you are safe now. It can be hard to think in this way during a flashback, so it could help to write down or record some useful phrases at a time when you're feeling better.
- Comfort yourself. For example, you could curl up in a blanket, cuddle a pet, listen to soothing music or watch a favourite film.
- Keep a diary. Making a note of what happens when you have a flashback could help you spot patterns in what triggers these experiences for you. You might also learn to notice early signs that they are beginning to happen.
- Try grounding techniques. Grounding techniques can keep you connected to the present and help you cope with flashbacks or intrusive thoughts. For example, you could describe your surroundings out loud or count objects of a particular type or colour.

#### Confide in someone

Lots of people who experience PTSD find it hard to open up to others. This may be because you feel unable to talk about what has happened to you. However, you don't need to be able to describe the trauma to tell someone how you are currently feeling. It could help to talk to a friend or family member, or a professional psychotherapist or counsellor.

#### Give yourself time

Everyone has their own unique response to trauma and it's important to take things at your own pace. For example, it may not be helpful to talk about your experiences before you feel ready. Try to be patient with yourself and don't judge yourself harshly for needing time and support to recover from PTSD.

#### Try peer support

Peer support brings together people who have had similar experiences, which some

people find very helpful. You may be able to find an appropriate support group via our 'useful resources' information.

#### Look after your physical health

Coping with PTSD can be exhausting. You might feel like you can't find the energy to take care of yourself, but looking after your physical health can make a difference to how you feel emotionally.

#### Diet

Eat nutritious food on a regular basis to keep your blood sugar stable. This can help you cope when things feel difficult.

#### Exercise

Spending time outside can be really helpful for your mental wellbeing. The outside world might feel overwhelming, but spending some time by the sea or in green, open space can boost your wellbeing.

#### Avoid drugs and alcohol

While you might want to use drugs or alcohol to cope with difficult feelings, memories or physical pain, they can make you feel worse in the long run. They can also make other problems worse, such as difficulty sleeping.

Sleep problems - (see our page on sleep for more information).

#### Find specialist support

You might find it useful to contact an organisation that specialises in advice and support for PTSD, (see our 'useful resources' information for details of relevant organisations.)

Trauma is well researched and there are now many resources and support for coping with the effects.

#### **How can I access treatment?**

Your GP may direct you to treatment via the NHS or direct you to specialist organisations that can offer therapy. You may also be able to access a choice of local services, with some organisations offering free or low-cost trauma

therapy. Your local Mind may have information about the services in your area.

Finding a private therapist is another option that can be explored.

### **What are the recommended treatments for PTSD?**

Trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (TF-CBT) and Eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR).

Other treatments helpful in managing PTSD are 1-1 counselling or psychotherapy, group therapy, arts therapies (music, art, drama), and dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT).

### **Helpful Contacts:**

*Anxiety UK* - Support, help and information for those with anxiety disorders including PTSD. Helpline: 0844 477 5774 (Monday–Friday 9.30am–5.30pm) [anxietyuk.org.uk](http://anxietyuk.org.uk)

*ASSIST trauma care* - Information and specialist help for people with PTSD and anyone supporting them. Helpline: 0178 856 0800 [assisttraumacare.org.uk](http://assisttraumacare.org.uk)

*Combat Stress* - Treatment and support for British Armed Forces Veterans who have mental health problems. Helpline: 0800 1381 619 (24 hours) [combatstress.org.uk](http://combatstress.org.uk)

*Disaster Action* - Information and support for people affected by major disasters in the UK and overseas. [disasteraction.org.uk](http://disasteraction.org.uk)

#### *Elefriends*

A supportive online community which provides online peer support for anyone experiencing a mental health problem. [elefriends.org.uk](http://elefriends.org.uk)

*Freedom from Torture* - Provides direct clinical services to survivors of torture who arrive in the UK. Has access to interpreters. [freedomfromtorture.org](http://freedomfromtorture.org)

#### *HAVOCA (Help for Adult Victims of Child Abuse)*

Information for adults who were abused in childhood, including an online support forum. [havoca.org](http://havoca.org)

*Lifecentre* - Telephone counselling, support and information for survivors of sexual abuse and anyone supporting them. Helpline: 0808 802 0808 [lifecentre.uk.com](http://lifecentre.uk.com)

People experiencing PTSD are not routinely prescribed medication. However, you might be offered medication if:-

You also have depression

You have sleep problems caused by PTSD

You are unable or unwilling to try talking treatments.

Many people overcome trauma, and go on to support and inspire others who have had life-altering negative experiences.

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*Moodjuice* - Free online self-help guide from the NHS which includes some self-help resources for PTSD. [moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk](http://moodjuice.scot.nhs.uk)

#### *The National Association for People Abused in Childhood (NAPAC)*

Support for adult survivors of any type of childhood abuse, including local support groups. 0808 801 0331 (freephone, Monday–Thursday 10am–9pm and Friday 10am–6pm) [napac.org.uk](http://napac.org.uk)

#### *The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)*

Information and clinical guidelines on recommended treatments for different conditions, including PTSD. [nice.org.uk](http://nice.org.uk)

*NHS Choices* - Provides information on PTSD and complex PTSD, including local talk therapy services. [nhs.uk](http://nhs.uk)

*RoadPeace* - Information and support for those seriously injured by road crash and bereaved families. [roadpeace.org](http://roadpeace.org) Helpline: 08454 500 355 (Monday–Friday 9am–5pm) [helpline@roadpeace.org](mailto:helpline@roadpeace.org)

*The Survivors Trust* - Lists local specialist services for survivors of sexual violence, including advocates and Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs). 0178 855 0554 [thesurvivorstrust.org](http://thesurvivorstrust.org)

*Victim Support* - An independent charity for people affected by crime and traumatic events. Provides emotional and practical help. 0808 168 9111 [victimsupport.org.uk](http://victimsupport.org.uk)