

# Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

## What is post-traumatic stress disorder?

PTSD can develop following involvement in a critical incident such as a life-threatening assault or traffic accident. PTSD can also develop among people who witnessed these events.

During the traumatic incident people can feel intense fear, helplessness, horror and a sense of being overwhelmed and unable to cope. It's difficult to predict who will develop PTSD after such an incident, and not everyone will do so. In some people PTSD develops soon after the trauma. It's not unusual, however, to see a delayed onset of symptoms, sometimes months or even years after the initial trauma.

The strict definition of PTSD is that the trauma you had or witnessed must be serious. Examples of this are - a severe accident, rape, a life-threatening assault, torture, seeing someone killed or a natural disaster such as a strong earthquake. However, symptoms similar to PTSD can develop in some people after less severe events. What they all have in common, however, is that the problematic symptoms begin with the incident.

## So who gets it?

Certain groups of people are more prone to PTSD than others:

- Emergency services, especially rescue workers such as fire fighters
- Survivors of road traffic accidents
- Rape victims
- The majority of people who have been tortured develop PTSD
- Military personnel involved in combat

## What are the symptoms?

- Recurring and intrusive thoughts and memories surrounding the incident. Flashbacks can happen and these can be distressing
- Avoidance: this is when people try to avoid anything that reminds them of the incident. This includes thoughts, conversations, associated places, people, activities or anything which may trigger memories of the trauma. A common trigger is reports in the media, especially at anniversaries of incidents
- A feeling of emotional numbness and feeling isolation from others. Some people report that nothing feels 'real' anymore. Relationships with those close to you may suffer
- You may lose interest in previously enjoyable activities and only be able to look on the dark side of life
- Hypersensitivity - This includes:
  - Irritability
  - Bouts of temper

Post traumatic stress disorder is generally defined as a condition where the sufferer experiences recurring distressing and intrusive memories and other symptoms after involvement in a traumatic event.

The important thing to remember about PTSD is that it is **a normal reaction to an abnormal event which is outside the range of normal experience.**

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- Being constantly on guard and aware of every 'danger'
- Exaggerated startle response, jumping at every little thing
- Problems sleeping or staying asleep, awakening very early and unable to return to sleep
- Difficulty concentrating and short term memory problems.

All of the above are normal reactions to an **abnormal** event and are easily understood in relation to the 'fight or flight' response. If you don't know what that is, or would like an information sheet on fight or flight, simply visit our web site or contact us. In most cases, PTSD resolves itself in about 6 months. In some cases the symptoms of PTSD persist long-term. Modern research now means that trauma specialists have effective techniques they can use to help people. There is no need to wait and see if your symptoms are going to persist beyond 6 months. You can seek help immediately after a traumatic incident.

## What about treatment?

The aim of treatment is not to wipe away the memories. What happened has happened and that can't be changed. The aim is to desensitise the memory so it no longer causes you distress. We all have unpleasant or disturbing memories but they don't interfere with our day to day lives. Successful treatment for PTSD will return you to a state where you can function well in your day to day life without the distress you previously experienced. Many thousands of people have left PTSD behind and gone on to live full and active lives.

**Effective treatment options:** See our web site ([www.traumaregister.co.uk](http://www.traumaregister.co.uk)) for more information.

The following treatment options have been shown to be effective for those already suffering from PTSD:

- Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)
- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)
- The Rewind Technique
- Anxiety management
- Relaxation training

## Can it be prevented?

- Critical Incident Debriefing is often available shortly after an incident. Debriefing is not a treatment but is aimed at **prevention**, to stop PTSD developing in the first place. It should always be carried out by an experienced trauma specialist, trained and qualified to carry out a debrief.
- Debriefing should not be confused with counselling or therapy as the procedure is completely different.
- It is a specific, targeted and highly effective intervention. A fact sheet is available from our web site