

# Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

## ***What is Post Traumatic Stress disorder?***

Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the name given to a group of psychological problems. These problems can occur when a person experiences, or sees, a traumatic event, or a series of traumatic events.

***Traumatic events:*** A traumatic event is one that makes a person feel that he or she, or other people, are under threat.

PTSD can be caused in various ways:

- by a single event, e.g. being attacked, or being involved in an accident; or
- by a series of events, e.g. being physically, or sexually abused; or
- by a long-lasting episode during which the individual feels threatened in some way, e.g. by being 'stalked', or harassed at work.

For an event to be traumatic, it does not have to be dangerous. Instead, what matters is whether the person *feels* threatened. E.g. even a minor accident can cause PTSD because, after the accident, the person no longer feels safe in his/her car.

## ***Differences between people***

The main features of PTSD are given below. Not everyone who has experienced trauma will have all of these experiences but most people will have some of them. Sometimes, they appear a few weeks after the trauma. However, with some types of trauma, the main features might not show until months, or even years, later. In many cases, the features disappear after a few weeks. However, they can last for months and years. How long they last and how badly a person is affected depends mainly upon the following.

- The nature of the trauma
- Whether the person had experienced previous traumatic events
- The sorts of support and advice which s/he received after the trauma
- How well s/he usually copes with stress.

## ***Features of PTSD***

### ***1. Re-experiencing of the traumatic event***

A person who has PTSD re-experiences the traumatic event(s). This can be 'out of the blue' or when they are reminded of the event(s). E.g. by returning to the scene, by hearing a loud noise or by seeing a TV programme.

Examples of re-experiencing include:

- having thoughts or memories of the event(s) pop into their head even when they are busy doing something else
- having frightening dreams or nightmares, not necessarily about the event(s)
- having vivid mental pictures (flashbacks) of the event(s)
- feeling very anxious or upset when reminded of the event(s)

### ***2. Avoiding anything to do with the event(s)***

The person will try to avoid doing things that might remind him or her of the traumatic event(s).

Examples of this include:

- trying to avoid talking about the event(s)
- trying to avoid thinking about, or remembering, the event(s)
- not being able to recall some important aspect of the event(s)
- avoiding places, things, or people connected with the event(s)

### **3. Unusual emotions and feelings**

The person can have feelings that are very different to ones that s/he has had before. Often this is because s/he has become more aware that life is temporary.

Examples of this include:

- losing interest in activities that s/he used to enjoy
- being very alert to possible dangers, e.g. carrying out unnecessary safety checks, or being 'wary' of others
- 'numbing', i.e. the person is unable to experience some emotions, e.g. is unable to have loving feelings

### **4. Guilt and self-blame**

The person often feels guilty or blames him or herself for aspects of the event(s). E.g. that s/he survived when other did not, that s/he did not do more to help him/herself, or that s/he has been so badly affected.

### **5. Signs of anxiety or stress**

Anxiety and stress affect people in different ways.

Some examples include:

- headaches; chest pains; butterflies; difficulty sleeping; tiredness
- poor concentration; forgetfulness; making stupid mistakes, taking longer over things
- smoking more; drinking more; being restless; losing interest in sex
- being more irritable; having outbursts of anger; loss of self-confidence; being more tense; feeling something bad is going to happen; feeling depressed

## ***Treatment for PTSD***

Treatment involves helping the person to face up to what is making them anxious, e.g. by trying the things that they are avoiding and by speaking about what they have experienced. Treatment is gradual and people work at their own rate. Some people find that medication (prescribed by their GP) can also be of help.

## ***How to get help***

If you think that you may have PTSD, speak to your GP or to your nurse or health visitor. She or he will be able to advise you and, if necessary, can refer you to the Clinical Psychology Department. You will then be offered an appointment with the clinical psychologist or cognitive-behavioural therapist attached to your Surgery. She or he will help you to understand better what you are experiencing and to learn skills that can help you overcome your difficulties. Most treatment for PTSD is psychological.

## ***Books about PTSD include:***

*Overcoming Traumatic Stress*

By C Herbert and A Wetmore (Constable Robinson)

*Overcoming Childhood Trauma*

By H Kennerley (Constable Robinson)

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