

PTSD Information Document

What is PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a type of anxiety disorder which you may develop after being involved in, or witnessing, traumatic events.

When is it diagnosed?

Many people find that symptoms associated with PTSD disappear within a few weeks, but if your symptoms last for longer than a month, you might be given a diagnosis of PTSD. Your GP might refer you to a specialist before this if your symptoms are particularly severe.

Experiences of facing stigma

There are lots of misconceptions about PTSD. For example, people may wrongly assume it means you are 'dwelling' on past events. They might even suggest that you should 'get over it' or 'move on'. But having PTSD isn't a choice or a sign of weakness, and it's important to remember that you are not alone.

Refugees and PTSD

PTSD is more common among migrants, refugees and asylum seekers than the rest of the population. This is often because they may have had traumatic experiences in their home country such as war, violence, abuse, extreme poverty and other difficulties. Traumatic experiences can also be experienced due to a stressful and dangerous journey to seek asylum. Migrants may also have traumatic experiences in their new country due to stresses such as domestic violence, racist abuse, loss of identity, language difficulties, financial difficulties, or fearing deportation.

40 per cent or more of refugees suffer from PTSD

90 per cent or more of refugee children suffer from PTSD

(Source: PTSD UK)

PTSD may be described differently in some situations:

- Delayed-onset PTSD – if your symptoms emerge more than six months after experiencing trauma, this might be described as 'delayed PTSD' or 'delayed-onset PTSD'.
- Complex PTSD – if you experienced trauma at an early age or it lasted for a long time, you might be given a diagnosis of 'complex PTSD'.
- Birth trauma – PTSD that develops after a traumatic experience of childbirth is also known as 'birth trauma'

If you experience some PTSD symptoms while supporting someone close to you who's experienced trauma, this is sometimes known as 'secondary trauma'.

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The symptoms of PTSD

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
- Being easily upset or angry
- Extreme alertness, also sometimes called 'hypervigilance'
- Disturbed sleep or a lack of sleep
- Irritability or aggressive behaviour
- Finding it hard to concentrate – including on simple or everyday tasks
- Being jumpy or easily startled
- Self-destructive behaviour or recklessness
- Other symptoms of anxiety

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

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Why does PTSD have physical effects?

Sometimes people experiencing the physical symptoms above are not aware that they are being caused by PTSD. When we feel stressed emotionally, the body automatically prepares by responding physically to a threat.

Studies have shown that someone with PTSD will continue producing these hormones when they're no longer in danger, which is thought to explain some symptoms such as extreme alertness and being easily startled.

What are flashbacks?

A flashback is a vivid experience in which you relive some aspects of a traumatic event or feel as if it is happening right now. This can sometimes be like watching a video of what happened, but flashbacks do not necessarily involve seeing images, or reliving events from start to finish. You might experience any of the following:

- Seeing full or partial images of what happened
- Noticing sounds, smells or tastes connected to the trauma
- Feeling physical sensations, such as pain or pressure
- Experiencing emotions that you felt during the trauma

You might notice that particular places, people or situations can trigger a flashback for you, which could be due to them reminding you of the trauma in some way. Or you might find that flashbacks seem to happen at random. Flashbacks can last for just a few seconds, or continue for several hours or even days.

PTSD and other mental health problems

It's common to experience other mental health problems alongside PTSD, which could include:

- Other anxiety disorders
- Depression
- Dissociative disorders
- Self-harm
- Suicidal feelings

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What causes PTSD?

The situations we find traumatic can vary from person to person. There are many different harmful or life-threatening 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

Secondary trauma

If you experience symptoms of PTSD while supporting someone close to you who has experienced trauma, this is sometimes known as 'secondary trauma' or 'secondary traumatic stress'.

What is complex PTSD?

Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (complex PTSD, sometimes abbreviated to c-PTSD or CPTSD) is a condition where you experience some symptoms of PTSD along with some additional symptoms, such as:

- Difficulty controlling your emotions
- Feeling very hostile or distrustful towards the world
- Constant feelings of emptiness or hopelessness
- Feeling as if you are permanently damaged or worthless
- Feeling as if you are completely different to other people
- Feeling like nobody can understand what happened to you
- Avoiding friendships and relationships, or finding them very difficult
- Often experiencing dissociative symptoms such as depersonalisation or derealisation
- Regular suicidal feelings

You are more likely to develop complex PTSD if:

- You experienced trauma at an early age
- The trauma lasted for a long time
- Escape or rescue were unlikely or impossible
- You have experienced multiple traumas
- You were harmed by someone close to you

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Complex PTSD and emotional flashbacks

If you have complex PTSD you may be particularly likely to experience what some people call an 'emotional flashback', in which you have intense feelings that you originally felt during the trauma, such as fear, shame, sadness or despair. You might react to events in the present as if they are causing these feelings, without realising that you are having a flashback.

PTSD and sleep problems

Lots of people who experience PTSD have problems sleeping. You might find it hard to fall or stay asleep, feel unsafe during the night, or feel anxious or afraid of having nightmares.

Treatment

Medication for PTSD

People experiencing PTSD aren't 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.

Talking treatments for PTSD

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) – the organisation that produces guidelines on best practice in health care – currently recommends two types of talking treatment for PTSD:

- Trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy (TF-CBT). This is a form of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) specifically adapted for PTSD. NICE recommends that you are offered 8–12 regular sessions of around 60–90 minutes, seeing the same therapist at least once a week.
- Eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR). This is a fairly new treatment that can reduce PTSD symptoms such as being easily startled. It involves making rhythmic eye movements while recalling the traumatic event. The rapid eye movements are intended to create a similar effect to the way your brain processes memories and experiences while you're sleeping. EMDR UK & Ireland - a professional association of EMDR clinicians and researchers - provides extensive information about EMDR on its website