

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a long lasting and sometimes delayed anxiety disorder resulting from a traumatic event. A large number of cases are war-related. People suffering from PTSD can benefit from counselling, support and medicines.

Who gets PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a serious psychological reaction that some people develop after a very frightening or traumatic experience, especially an experience that threatens life or safety (e.g., war, assault, natural disaster, serious accident, torture or abuse).

Most people who experience a traumatic event will have emotional and psychological reactions (e.g., fear, sadness, guilt, shame, anger, grief) that reduce with time. Some people develop the longer lasting condition of PTSD.

Signs and symptoms

PTSD symptoms may occur immediately after the traumatic event or may appear months or years later. There are three main types of symptoms:

- Re-living the traumatic event through unwanted and repeated memories (flashbacks) or nightmares. Strong emotional or physical reactions such as sweating, heart palpitations or panic may occur with these memories
- Being very wound up or alert. This may lead to sleeping difficulties, irritability, poor concentration, being easily startled and constantly watching for signs of danger
- Avoiding reminders of the event and feeling emotionally numb. People with PTSD intentionally avoid things related to the traumatic event such as thoughts, feelings, people, places and activities. They may also lose interest in daily life, feel separated from family and friends and feel flat or numb.

PTSD or a traumatic event may also lead to anxiety, depression and misuse of alcohol or other drugs.

Treatment

Treatment can help people with PTSD get relief from symptoms, improve their family life and social life and obtain stable employment.

Management of PTSD often involves a number of different strategies including:

- Learning about the condition
- Counselling and psychological therapies, which may include learning to think about what happened without distress
- Joining a support group with others suffering from PTSD
- Treatment programs (e.g., anger management)
- Medicines
- Reducing use of alcohol or other drugs, if this is a problem
- Support for family members.

Medicines

Prescription medicines that can help a person with PTSD include:

- Anti-anxiety medicines – may help relieve stress and anxiety symptoms
- Antidepressants – may help relieve anxiety, depression and other PTSD symptoms.

Consult your doctor or pharmacist before:

- Stopping regular PTSD medicines – stopping suddenly may make symptoms worse
- Taking any other medicines (including complementary medicines) in addition to prescribed PTSD medicines – as they may interfere with each other.

Talk to your doctor or pharmacist if you have any questions or concerns about medicines for PTSD.

What about alcohol?

Some people drink a lot of alcohol when under stress.

Alcohol will not help PTSD and may make it worse. It is important to know that alcohol:

- Will impair driving and the ability to work
- May make you feel depressed
- May increase side effects of PTSD medicines. It will increase sedation from anti-anxiety medicines.

If taking medicines, always check with a doctor or pharmacist before drinking alcohol.

Self care

- Admit to PTSD symptoms and get help. Remember that asking for help is not a sign of weakness.
- Accept help from family and friends – studies show this helps recovery.
- Do things that help you relax. Learn and use some relaxation techniques.

- Exercise at a moderate level for at least 30 minutes on all or most days of the week. Regular aerobic exercise can help reduce the physical effects of stress and trauma.
- Eat regular, healthy meals, including plenty of fruit, vegetables and grain foods. Limit foods high in fat, sugar or salt.
- Get plenty of sleep and rest.
- Limit or stop smoking as nicotine may make anxiety worse. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.
- Limit or stop caffeine (e.g., tea, coffee, cola, energy drinks) as it may make anxiety worse.
- Follow 'low-risk' drinking guidelines for alcohol or stop drinking alcohol. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.
- Some people find it helpful to write about their experiences and feelings.
- Be aware of anniversaries or events that may increase distress.
- Join a support group.

If you are an emergency services worker, counselling is available for you as well as for the trauma victims.

Care for family members

PTSD also affects family members of people with PTSD. They may need to cope with difficult behaviour and job instability. Families can get help from support organisations.

Important

If you (or someone you know) have had a traumatic experience (even if it was many years ago), check the list of symptoms – you (or your friend) may benefit from consulting a doctor about PTSD.

For more information

A doctor

Listed under 'Medical Practitioners' in the yellow pages of the phone book.

Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (ACPMH)

Phone: (03) 9936 5100

Website: www.ncptsd.unimelb.edu.au

Lifeline

Phone: 13 11 14 (freecall 24 hours service from anywhere in Australia)

Website: www.lifeline.org.au

The Right Mix

Information from the Department of Veterans' Affairs on the use and misuse of alcohol.

Website: www.therightmix.gov.au

Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS)

Phone: 1800 011 046 (freecall from anywhere in Australia)

Website: www.dva.gov.au

Victims of Crime

Contact your local police station.

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthinsite.gov.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

National Prescribing Service (NPS) Medicines Information

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

Related fact cards

» *Alcohol*

» *Anxiety*

» *Depression*

» *Medicines & Driving (website only – ask your pharmacist)*

» *Relaxation Techniques*

» *Sleeping Problems*

» *Staying a Non-Smoker*

» *Wise Use of Medicines (website only – ask your pharmacist)*

Your Self Care Pharmacy: