

# PTSD - POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

# **PTSD - POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER**

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**“Often it isn’t  
the initiating  
trauma that  
creates  
seemingly  
insurmountable  
pain, but  
the lack of  
support after.”**

**S. Kelley Harrell**

# What is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD as it is commonly referred to, is experienced generally after a traumatic event in a person's life. Symptoms of PTSD may be evident days, weeks, months or even years after being exposed to a traumatic event, or a series of events. Symptoms may persist for an extended period by triggers that can bring back memories of the event. The symptoms may become chronic, developing a disabling condition that causes anxiety and depression, interfering with a person's ability to function in life.

Traumatic events may be from a range of events, including childhood abuse or trauma, domestic violence, sexual assault, robbery, an accident, experience of war, assault, torture, or from witnessing the trauma of another person, particularly a family member or friend.

## Causes of PTSD

Not all traumatic events will trigger PTSD, and many people are able to recover on their own. Those people who continue to experience distress, flashbacks, fear, sleep disruption and disturbance of normal life activities, may require treatment and support to help them manage the trauma, particularly if the symptoms continue for a month or longer after the event.

Other possible events that may cause PTSD are;

- Natural disasters, such as bushfires, floods or earthquakes
- Living in a war zone, or a person serving in war
- Witnessing abuse or death of another person

Risk factors for developing PTSD include;

- Repeated trauma
- A history of a mental disorder, such as anxiety or depression
- Trauma or abuse in early childhood
- Lack of social support after a traumatic event or experience
- The type and severity of the trauma
- Further trauma or stress such as loss of a loved one or a home

## Symptoms of PTSD

Post Traumatic Stress does not affect everyone in the same way. Symptoms may remain dormant for years after the traumatic event and may be triggered by a memory or incident. Individuals may be affected by subtle changes in daily life, withdrawal and numbness, disturbing flashbacks or physical symptoms of anxiety. Some people may experience depression, or turn to substance abuse as a way of blocking the memories and self medicating.

There are three categories of symptoms that occur commonly in people with PTSD:

- Intrusions- experiencing flashbacks or nightmares suddenly, without control.
- Hyper-alertness- a state of increased sensitivity or hyper-vigilance to things such as a phone ringing, other sounds, smells, or a person. This leads to physical reaction such as fear, agitation, anxiety or worry of perceived danger.
- Avoidance- avoiding certain places, going out alone, situations that may result in memory or feeling of the traumatic experience. It may cause feelings of withdrawal or numbness and lack of ability to experience usual feelings toward a person or things.

Other symptoms may include difficulty in trusting others, lack of feeling safe or secure, detachment from family and friends. A person may experience rapid breathing, poor sleep patterns, deterioration in working ability or study.





## Diagnosis of PTSD

If feelings of fear, anxiety, lack of motivation or lack of sleep persist for more than a month after a traumatic event, it is advisable to speak with a doctor. This is also recommended if symptoms appear long after the event based on a nightmare, flashback or memory.

The doctor will perform a mental health assessment and take a history and family history. They will enquire about symptoms and possibly perform a physical examination with tests to determine if there are other causes for the symptoms.

A referral may be given to a psychiatrist or psychologist for further evaluation and treatment. In order to diagnose PTSD, the symptoms must be severe enough that they are interfering with the person's ability to function at work, home, or socially. A full diagnosis is usually six months after the trauma. Once it is confirmed, treatment may begin.

## Treatment of PTSD

There is a range of effective psychological and pharmacological treatments available for the treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Trauma focused Cognitive Behaviour Therapy is used by a psychotherapist, psychologist or psychiatrist, to work through memories of the trauma in a safe environment. This assists with modifying thoughts and beliefs and gradual exposure to triggers that are being avoided. It may take several sessions to begin feeling relief of symptoms.

Individual counselling or later, group therapy are used for treating symptoms by enabling the person to talk about the event, and in a group setting regain a sense of community and trust.

Medication may also be used to relieve symptoms of anxiety and depression. It assists with control of behaviour and thoughts and is often necessary to be treated prior to other treatment.

Some people resist treatment for fear that they may feel worse, belief that nothing will help them, disappointment in themselves for not being able to cope, or avoiding the pain of relieving the experience.

If you or someone you know is experiencing signs and symptoms of PTSD, or has been exposed to a traumatic event, it is important to be supportive and listen to the person without judgement.

- Acknowledge the experience and the impact on the person's life
- Don't blame the person, recognising the event was the cause
- Accept your own limitations in helping the person and encourage them to seek help. Offer to go with them for their first appointment with a health professional. Or ask someone to accompany you if you are seeking help.
- Seek emotional support for yourself if you feel you need to discuss the impact it is having on you. It is necessary to find support for yourself in order to help someone else.
- Listening without trying to fix the person is important. Let them know you are there but make sure you are taking care of yourself at the same time.

# Where do I go for help?

## The WayAhead Directory

is an online resource providing a comprehensive list of mental health related services in NSW.

[www.WayAhead.org.au](http://www.WayAhead.org.au)

Contact your local GP or health professional for an initial consultation or referral to a psychologist or psychiatrist

## Phone Lines

### WayAhead Mental Health Information Line

1300 794 991

Community Mental Health Team  
through the NSW Mental Health  
Intake Line 1800 011 511

Lifeline 24 hour counselling support  
13 11 14



Translating & Interpreting Service  
(TIS) 131 450

Please call the Mental Health Information Line through the Telephone Interpreter Service (TIS). Free to Australian citizens or permanent residents.

## Disclaimer

This information is for educational purposes. As neither brochures nor websites can diagnose people it is always important to obtain professional advice and/or help when needed.

This information may be reproduced with an acknowledgement to the Mental Health Association NSW.

The Association encourages feedback and welcomes comments about the information provided.

This fact sheet was last reviewed by Jamie Saltoon, 2017.

**“ I found people who  
understood exactly what I  
was going through ”**



