

What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (sometimes called PTSD) is a form of anxiety disorder. Some people develop this condition after they have experienced a traumatic event. This event might be a serious accident, physical or sexual assault, war or torture, or a natural disaster such as a bushfire or a flood. Strong reactions such as fear, horror, anger, sadness and hopelessness are natural after events like these, of course. In most cases, these feelings will pass after the normal working-through of emotions and talking things over in your own time with family, friends or colleagues.

When these feelings are intensely distressing and go on for more than four weeks, however, it is important to ask for help from a doctor or other health professional, as they may be symptoms of a more persistent condition such as PTSD. About 25% of people who are exposed to traumatic events develop PTSD. As well as being very upsetting, the symptoms interfere with the person's ability to carry on their everyday life, work and relationships. Treatment helps deal with the symptoms so that people are able to get on with their life again.

What are the symptoms?

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is identified by three main groups of symptoms:

- ④ *Flashbacks of the traumatic event through intrusive memories or nightmares.*
As well as strong emotions, there may be physical symptoms such as sweating, heart palpitations or panic attacks.
- ④ *Feeling emotionally numb and avoiding situations that are reminders of the trauma.*
Avoiding possible reminders of the trauma can cause someone to lose interest in day-to-day activities and become detached from friends and family. Some people experience 'dissociation' – a feeling of watching from a distance as events unfold.
- ④ *Feeling anxious and 'jumpy' for no reason.*
Heightened vigilance can mean the affected person is constantly on the lookout for danger, possibly leading to irritability and a lack of concentration.

Someone who has experienced a traumatic event may sometimes feel that they have 'got over' it, until they are confronted with a reminder that triggers symptoms again. Those affected may also develop other anxiety disorders (such as phobias or social anxiety), depression, or problems with alcohol and drug use. These conditions can be present at the same time as the PTSD, and require additional treatment.

What are the treatments?

Treatment usually involves psychological (talking) therapy with the person directly affected (and sometimes their family) by a qualified health professional such as a doctor or psychologist. The sooner someone is diagnosed and receives treatment, the more likely it is they will recover sooner. With help, a person can learn to manage their response in unavoidable situations that previously would have triggered a flashback. Medication can also be helpful for a time. With appropriate treatment and support people with PTSD are able to recover and get on with their lives.

What about friends and family?

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder can have a big impact on relationships. When a person tries to block out painful memories it can appear that they are irritable or uninterested in others. Help for families and friends to look after themselves as well as the person directly affected is also important.

How do I find out more?

Ask your doctor about any concerns you have, or contact the SANE Helpline on 1800 18 SANE (7263) for information, advice and referral. SANE Australia also produces a range of easy to read publications and multimedia resources on mental illness. Visit the SANE Bookshop at www.sane.org for more information on these and other resources:

- ④ [SANE Guide to Anxiety Disorders](#)
- ④ [SANE DVD Kit on Anxiety Disorders \(includes DVD and Guide\)](#)
- ④ [SANE Guide to Medication and other Treatments](#)