

Patient information from BMJ

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Post-traumatic stress disorder: what is it?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can affect people who've been involved in one or more frightening or dangerous events.

But it doesn't just affect people who are directly involved. For example, you can also get PTSD if you've witnessed a traumatic event, or you've been involved in another way, perhaps as a member of the emergency services.

What is PTSD?

It's normal to feel frightened or anxious after something traumatic happens to you. Although these feelings are upsetting, they usually go away after a few weeks.

However, if these feelings last for longer than a month, and stop you getting on with your life, then you may have PTSD.

Most people with PTSD have symptoms straight after they've been through a traumatic event. But for some people the symptoms don't start until months or years later.

People often think that you only get PTSD if you've survived something exceptionally terrifying, like a rape or a war. But lots of other things can cause it too.

For example, you can get PTSD if someone close to you dies suddenly, or if you've been involved in a traffic accident.

What are the symptoms?

If you have PTSD, you may:

- have strong memories of a traumatic event
- have **flashbacks**, where you feel as if you're living through the event again
- have **nightmares** about the event
- try not to talk or think about what happened
- avoid people or places that remind them about it

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- feel alert, tense, or nervous
- feel irritable and angry. This can put a strain on your relationships with family and friends
- feel very negative about yourself and about the world, and withdraw from other people.

You can also get **physical symptoms** if you have PTSD. These can include:

- dizziness
- nausea
- headaches
- feeling as though your heart is beating very fast or hard
- difficulty concentrating, and
- difficulty sleeping.

A lot of these feelings are normal after a frightening event. But if you have PTSD, your symptoms don't fade with time. And they start to interfere with your life.

PTSD can be difficult for doctors to spot. You may not like talking about the traumatic event you went through. But it's important to tell your doctor about it.

Doctors may mistake PTSD for other illnesses, such as depression, if they don't know about the traumatic experience that the person went through. And some people have depression as well as PTSD.

It's also not uncommon to have other illnesses, too, such as anxiety disorder, and problems with drugs or alcohol. These conditions need to be treated as well as the PTSD.

What will happen to me?

One of the hardest parts of having PTSD can be asking for help. But it's very important. Getting treatment can help you feel better and get on with your life. And it's never too late to start treatment.

With treatment, many people recover. But sometimes PTSD can be a lifelong condition. You may find that your symptoms come and go. You may feel better at times, and then feel worse if you come across something that reminds you of what you've been through. If this is the case, having treatment can help you cope.

Where can I get help?

Your doctor is the best person to talk to first. He or she may refer you to a specialist in PTSD, such as a psychologist.

PTSD can make it harder to cope with life in general. You may feel you need some practical support, or someone to talk to. Friends and family members may be able to help. And your doctor will be able to tell you about support services and support groups in your area.

For more information on treatments for PTSD see our leaflet *PTSD: what treatments work?*

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