

# Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



## FACT SHEET 31

### THIS FACT SHEET PROVIDES INFORMATION ABOUT:

- Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- how PTSD can be treated
- how to help a person who is experiencing PTSD.

### WHAT IS POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER?

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a type of anxiety disorder which can occur if a person or someone close to them has experienced, witnessed or been confronted by an event or series of events like war, torture, a major accident, natural disaster or personal/family violence. The person may have experienced or been threatened by death or serious injury and have felt intense fear, helplessness or horror.

Stress is a normal reaction to a situation where a person feels under pressure. For example, it's common for people to feel stressed or tense when meeting work or study deadlines, sitting exams or speaking in front of a group of people. Sometimes, however, a stressful event can be so serious or intense it can trigger PTSD.

It's important to note that stress is not depression. However, acute distress, associated with tough times can occur and may be a risk factor for depression if it persists.

### HOW COMMON IS PTSD?

Although between 50 and 80 per cent of the population will experience a trauma in their lifetime severe enough to potentially cause PTSD, not all of them will develop the disorder. It's estimated that 8 per cent of the population will experience PTSD, many of whom will recover after the first few months following the trauma.

### WHAT ARE THE SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF PTSD?

Immediately after a person has experienced an intensely traumatic event, it's very common to experience a range of symptoms similar to those of PTSD – such as spending time

thinking about the traumatic event/s, feeling afraid and on “high alert”. However, if a person experiences the symptoms **for more than one month**, he/she may have PTSD.

### ARE YOU EXPERIENCING PTSD?

You may have PTSD if you have:

- experienced or seen something that involved death, injury, torture or abuse and felt very scared or helpless or thought you may have died  YES  NO
- had upsetting memories or dreams of the event for at least ONE month  YES  NO
- found it hard to go about your daily life e.g. made it difficult for you to work/study or get along with family and friends  YES  NO

If you answered 'YES' to ALL of these questions, have you also experienced at least THREE of the following:

- avoided activities that remind you of the event  YES  NO
- had trouble remembering parts of the event  YES  NO
- felt less interested in doing things you used to enjoy  YES  NO
- had trouble feeling positive emotions e.g. love or excitement  YES  NO
- thought less about the future e.g. career or family goals  YES  NO

AND have you experienced at least TWO of the following:

- had difficulties sleeping e.g. had bad dreams, or found it hard to fall or stay asleep  YES  NO
- been angry or irritated easily  YES  NO
- had trouble concentrating  YES  NO
- felt “on guard” or tense  YES  NO
- been startled easily  YES  NO

**It's important to note that these checklists provide only a rough guide or indication as to whether someone has Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. For a full diagnosis, talk to a doctor.**

# Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

## FACT SHEET 31

### WHAT PUTS A PERSON AT RISK OF PTSD?

A combination of factors can put a person at risk of PTSD.

- **Family history:** People who experience PTSD often have a history of mental health problems in their family.
- **Personal history:** People who have a personal history of other mental health problems or have experienced repeated traumatic events are more likely to experience PTSD.
- **Biological factors:** Studies have found that trauma can cause changes in brain function that produce symptoms of PTSD and some people have a predisposition towards this.
- **Social factors:** PTSD may be more severe if there is a lack of support from family and friends. For example, a rape victim who is either blamed for the assault or not supported may be at greater risk of developing PTSD.
- **Situational factors:** A person is at greater risk of experiencing PTSD if the traumatic event(s):
  - occurred close to the person
  - occurred early in life
  - was a result of human activity as opposed to a natural disaster
  - is seen by the person to have had the potential to cause his/her death.

### TREATMENTS FOR PTSD

PTSD is very treatable. Treatment is recommended for people whose symptoms of PTSD last more than a month. There are several treatments used in PTSD, with more severe problems requiring a combination of approaches. These include:

#### • PSYCHOLOGICAL THERAPIES

Psychological treatment may not only help a person to recover, but can also help to prevent a recurrence of PTSD. Generally, psychological treatment (talking therapy) has been found to be the most effective way to treat anxiety disorders. Psychological treatment can help people face their fears, change their thought patterns and the way they react to certain situations. This can help their recovery and prevent the illness returning.

#### • MEDICATION

While psychological treatment is the first choice for treating anxiety disorders, medical treatment can also be helpful where PTSD is severe, ongoing and does not respond to psychological treatment alone. Some types of antidepressants can be helpful for the management of anxiety disorders.

Short-term use of some types of sedatives can help a person to re-establish a normal sleeping pattern. However, longer-term use of sedatives should be avoided as they can be addictive and may make it difficult for the person to benefit from psychological treatment.

For more details on medications which are effective in treating symptoms of anxiety disorders visit [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) or call the *beyondblue* info line 1300 22 4636 (local call cost).

### HOW TO HELP YOURSELF IF YOU HAVE PTSD

There are many ways that people with PTSD can reduce their symptoms and manage their illness.

- Find out about PTSD and available treatments.
- Acknowledge the symptoms of PTSD which may be affecting you.
- Recognise that the process of recovering from PTSD is different for everybody. Most people recover from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms in the first year but some people exposed to severe trauma may experience symptoms for a longer time.
- Establish a daily routine that includes putting aside time to do enjoyable things such as reading, gardening or listening to music. For more information see ***beyondblue* Fact Sheet 8 – Keeping active and *beyondblue* Fact Sheet 15 – Recovery.**
- Reduce stress by practising relaxation techniques such as breathing and muscle relaxation. For more information see ***beyondblue* Fact Sheet 6 – Reducing stress.**
- People with PTSD can often have difficulty sleeping well. This can include difficulty falling asleep, early waking, nightmares and flashbacks. Sleeping well can help the recovery process. For more information on how to address sleep-related problems, see ***beyondblue* Fact Sheet 7 – Sleeping well.**



- Some people develop alcohol-use problems as a consequence of trying to overcome flashbacks and sleep disturbance. As a strategy to deal with these symptoms, alcohol is ineffective and contributes to prolonging the disorder.
- Try to stay healthy. Exercise regularly, eat a healthy and balanced diet, and reduce alcohol and other drugs. For more information, see **beyondblue Fact Sheet 7 – Sleeping well**, **beyondblue Fact Sheet 8 – Keeping active** and **beyondblue Fact Sheet 9 – Reducing alcohol and other drugs**.
- Avoid making big life-changing decisions, like moving house or changing jobs.
- Keep active and spend time with people whose company you enjoy.
- Don't fight flashbacks – they are common and will pass with time and the right treatment.

## HOW TO HELP SOMEONE WITH PTSD

Family and friends can play an important role in helping people with PTSD to recover.

- Acknowledge the person's experience of a traumatic event has had a major impact on his/her life and that he/she cannot "just pull themselves together" and "get over it".
- Let the person know that you are there for them if they need a chat. Also, be aware that talking about the event soon after it has taken place, or even a long time after the event, can be difficult and sometimes unhelpful.
- Offer support.
- Be understanding if the person is easily upset and cries or becomes angry.
- Encourage the person to re-establish a daily routine which includes activities he/she finds enjoyable and/or relaxing.
- Encourage the person to try to stay healthy by establishing good sleeping patterns, exercising regularly, reducing alcohol and other drugs and eating nourishing food.
- Don't expect too much too soon – recovery can take a while and there may be some *ups* and *downs*.

- Acknowledge any gains the person makes – no matter how small.
- Find emotional support for *yourself* – dealing with and caring for a person with PTSD can be challenging. You may need support too.

## WHERE TO GET HELP

- **A doctor** who is a General Practitioner (GP) is a good place to start. In some cases, the person may be referred to a mental health specialist like a psychiatrist or psychologist. For a list of GPs with expertise in treating anxiety disorders visit the *beyondblue* website [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) and click on Get Help or call the *beyondblue* info line on 1300 22 4636 (local call cost).
- **Psychiatrists** are doctors who specialise in mental health. They can make medical and psychological assessments, conduct medical tests and prescribe medication. Most psychiatrists use psychological treatments and/or medical treatments.
- **Psychologists, Social Workers and Occupational Therapists** specialise in providing non-medical (psychological) treatment for PTSD, depression and related disorders. A rebate can now be claimed through Medicare for psychological treatments if the person has a mental disorder and is referred by a GP, psychiatrist or paediatrician to a registered psychologist, social worker or occupational therapist. This rebate can be claimed for part of the cost of up to 12 individual consultations (18 in exceptional circumstances) and 12 group sessions in a calendar year. Ask the referring medical practitioner for more details.

**To find a list of professionals who provide psychological treatment for which a Medicare rebate can be claimed, including Clinical Psychologists, Psychologists, Social Workers in Mental Health and Occupational Therapists go to [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) and click on Get Help, then Find a Doctor or other Mental Health Practitioner.**

People with PTSD often experience symptoms of other anxiety disorders, depression and/or abuse alcohol and other drugs. For more information on these disorders see **beyondblue Fact sheet 21 Anxiety disorders**, visit the *beyondblue* website [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au) or contact the *beyondblue* info line on 1300 22 4636 (local call cost).

# Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



## FACT SHEET 31

### WHERE TO GET INFORMATION

#### **Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health**

**www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au**  
**03 9496 2922**

Information, education and research on PTSD

#### **Veterans and Veterans' Families Counselling Service (VVCS)**

**Veterans' line – 1800 011 046**

**www.dva.gov.au/health/vvcs/vvcs.htm**

The VVCS – Veterans and Veterans' Families Counselling Service provides counselling and group programs to Australian veterans and peacekeepers and their families. VVCS provides a wide range of programs and treatments for war and service-related mental health conditions including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

#### **beyondblue: the national depression initiative**

**beyondblue info line 1300 22 4636 (local call cost)**

**www.beyondblue.org.au**

Information on depression, anxiety and related drug and alcohol problems, available treatments and referral only

**www.youthbeyondblue.com**

beyondblue's website for young people – information on depression and how to help a friend

#### **Lifeline**

**13 11 14**

24 hour counselling, information and referral (local call cost)

#### **Lifeline's Information Service**

**1300 13 11 14**

#### **Mensline Australia**

**1300 789 978**

Support for men with family and relationship problems

#### **Suicide Call Back Service**

**1300 659 467**

Free telephone support for those at risk of suicide, their carers and those bereaved by suicide

#### **CRUfAD**

**www.crufad.org**

Information about anxiety and its management

#### **Anxiety Recovery Centre**

**www.arcvic.com.au**

Information about anxiety disorders, their management and links to other services

#### **ADAVIC (The Anxiety Disorders Association of Victoria)**

**www.adavic.org.au**

Information about panic disorder, social phobia, agoraphobia, generalised anxiety and depression, and support services

#### **PADA (The Panic Anxiety Disorder Association)**

**www.pada.org.au**

Information on anxiety and depression (including postnatal depression), related research and publications

#### **Anxiety Disorders Alliance**

**www.ada.mentalhealth.asn.au**

Information on anxiety disorders, related resources and support groups

#### **Anxiety Network Australia**

**www.anxietynetwork.com.au**

Information on anxiety disorders, related programs, workshops, courses and stories from people living with these disorders

#### **TRANX (Tranquilliser Recovery and New Existence)**

**www.tranx.org.au**

Information on benzodiazepines (tranquillisers and sleeping pills), guidelines on how to use them safely, and strategies for sleep and anxiety management

#### **Moodgym**

**www.moodgym.anu.edu.au**

Online psychological therapy

#### **Climate.tv – interactive e-health**

**www.climate.tv**

Developed by medical experts, this is a self-management system for people with depression and anxiety.

#### **e-couch**

**www.ecouch.anu.edu.au**

Information about emotional problems, including depression and anxiety disorders

#### **Multicultural Mental Health Australia (MMHA)**

**www.mmha.org.au**

Information on mental health in languages other than English

© beyondblue: the national depression initiative, 2008.

PO Box 6100, Hawthorn West VIC 3122

T: (03) 9810 6100

beyondblue info line 1300 22 4636

F: (03) 9810 6111

E: [bb@beyondblue.org.au](mailto:bb@beyondblue.org.au)

W: [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)