

About posttraumatic stress disorder

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a set of reactions that can develop after someone has been through a traumatic event.

Any event that involves a threat to life or a serious injury has the potential to be traumatic. This includes natural disaster, war, a serious accident, physical or sexual assault. Most people will experience at least one of these types of events during their lives.

In the first days and weeks after a traumatic event, people often experience strong feelings of fear, sadness, guilt, anger, or grief. Generally, these feelings will resolve on their own, and with the support of family and friends, the person recovers. However, if the distress continues, it may mean that the person has developed PTSD or another mental health condition.

What is PTSD?

A person with PTSD has four main types of difficulties:

- Re-living the traumatic event – through unwanted memories, vivid nightmares, flashbacks, or intense reactions such as heart palpitations or panic when reminded of the event.
- Feeling wound up – having trouble sleeping or concentrating, feeling angry or irritable, taking risks, becoming easily startled, or constantly being on the look-out for danger.
- Avoiding reminders of the event – activities, places, people, thoughts or feelings that bring back memories of the trauma.
- Negative thoughts and feelings – feeling afraid, angry, guilty, flat, or numb a lot of the time, losing interest in day-to-day activities, feeling cut off from friends and family.

Between 5 and 10 percent of Australians will suffer from PTSD at some point in their lives.

It is not unusual for people with PTSD to experience other mental health problems like depression or anxiety. Some people may develop a habit of using alcohol or drugs as a way of coping.

PTSD in children

Older children and adolescents experience similar problems to adults when they develop PTSD. Younger children can express distress in a different way. For example, they may re-live the traumatic event through repetitive play rather than having unwanted memories of the event during the day. Many children have frightening dreams without recognisable content rather than nightmares that replay the traumatic event. Children may also lose interest in play, become socially withdrawn, or have extreme temper tantrums.

About one third of children who experience a traumatic event will develop PTSD.

Other problems that can develop alongside PTSD include anxiety or depression, defiant behaviour, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and in adolescents, suicidal thoughts and alcohol or drug use.

For more information

- Download a copy of *Recovery after Trauma – A Guide for People with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* from www.phoenixaustralia.org.
- Download a copy of *Joel and the storm – A story for children who have experienced trauma* from www.phoenixaustralia.org.
- Download a copy of *What the? Trauma, Stress & Teenagers – Understanding Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* from www.phoenixaustralia.org.
- Talk to your GP.
- For immediate assistance call Lifeline on 13 11 14.