What is posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and how can you recover?

What is trauma?

An event can be traumatic if it involves:

- death (actual or threatened),
- serious injury or
- violence.

Traumatic events are common. Most people will experience at least one traumatic event in their lives. Examples of traumatic events are:

- natural disaster
- war
- a serious accident
- physical or sexual assault

In Australia, the most common traumatic events are:

- Having someone close to you die unexpectedly
- Seeing someone badly injured or killed, or unexpectedly seeing a dead body
- Being in a life-threatening car accident

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 go away on their own, and with the support of family and friends, the person recovers. But if these negative feelings don't go away, it may mean that the person has developed PTSD or another mental health condition.

What is PTSD?

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a set of reactions that a person can experience after a traumatic event.

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 they remember 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.

It is common for people with PTSD to experience other mental health problems like depression or anxiety. Some people may start using alcohol or drugs to help them cope.

What treatments are available?

If you are still experiencing problems two weeks after a traumatic event, talk to your doctor or a mental health professional. They will decide if treatment would help you. There are different treatments for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) that work. For example:

- counselling,
- medication, or
- a combination of both.

Between 5% and 10% of Australians will experience PTSD at some point in their lives.

These treatments can work even if your traumatic experience was a long time ago.

The *Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Treatment of Acute Stress Disorder, PTSD and Complex PTSD* provide:

- recommendations to help people recover from trauma
- effective treatment options for people who develop PTSD and other posttraumatic mental health conditions.

You can read more about the recommended psychological treatments for PTSD on **this page**.

Other useful resources

Recovery after Trauma

A Guide for People with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Dealing with Trauma

A Guide for Young People who have Experienced Trauma

Helping my Children after Trauma

A Guide for Parents