



## **Post Traumatic Stress disorder (PTSD)**

### **What is it?**

People who have experienced a severe traumatic event, particularly one where their life was at risk, may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is important to note that acute distress following such an event is quite common but symptoms usually subside after a few weeks.

Only if symptoms are present for more than one month and seriously affect a person's quality of life and functioning is a diagnosis of PTSD considered. Symptoms usually include re-experiencing intrusions (e.g. intrusive memories, flashbacks and distressing dreams), avoidance of memories or reminders of the event, a decline in mood and increased hyperarousal (e.g. irritability or easily startled). Note that because PTSD is largely a fear response, it is different to grief, another common reaction following a traumatic event.

Research suggests that PTSD symptoms may be a result of experiences during a traumatic event not being laid down and integrated in the brain as they normally would. Some researchers have proposed that a fear network is created in the brain, keeping you in a state of high alert and constantly looking out for danger.

While this mechanism can be helpful for survival in dangerous situations, people can find themselves stuck in this state of high alert even when the danger has passed.

### **How common is it?**

According to the 2007 Australian National Survey of Mental Health, it is estimated that 1 in 16 Australians experienced PTSD in the 12 months before the survey, making it the most common anxiety disorder in Australia.

Individuals with PTSD frequently experience symptoms of another mental health condition, most commonly depressive, bipolar, anxiety and substance use disorders. Other comorbid disorders include conduct disorder, traumatic brain injury and neurocognitive disorder. In children, oppositional defiant disorder and separation anxiety can co-occur with PTSD.

### **What can I do about it?**

If you are concerned about your symptoms, particularly if they are affecting your quality of life, we recommend to make an appointment to discuss your concerns with a qualified mental health professional, like a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist. In some cases, a combined approach of seeing a psychiatrist and clinical psychologist has been found to be most helpful.

## **Professional Help**

Treating PTSD typically involves skills training in anxiety management followed by a range of structured strategies to facilitate emotional processing of the traumatic memory. A clinical psychologist will help a person to do this in a safe environment.

Another focus of psychological therapy for PTSD is to identify and work through how the experience of the trauma has altered the person's view of the world. It is common for people to view themselves or the world as bad following a traumatic event and that the world is an unsafe place. Themes of guilt and shame are also common.

Cognitive therapy will explore these changes in thinking to help the person successfully process the traumatic event.

## **Contact Us**

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