

## POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that arises as a delayed and/or protracted response to a seriously traumatic event. A traumatic event is one where we can see that we are in danger, our life is threatened or we feel that our life is threatened, or where we see other people dying or being injured - an experience that is overwhelming, frightening, and out of our control. Rape and childhood sexual abuse are particular incidents along with car and train crashes, 9/11, the bombings in London that may cause survivors to have PTSD.

The symptoms of PTSD can start after a delay of weeks, or even months. They usually appear within 6 months of a traumatic event. In some people these traumatic experiences set off a reaction that can last for many months or years. The first sign to a survivor is that you feel completely different to how you did before the rape. Your life feels like it has changed.

### A. What happens immediately after a Rape/Sexual Abuse?

**Shock** - stunned or dazed or numb, cut off from your feelings, or from what is going on around you.

**Denial** - you can't accept that it has happened - so you behave as though it hasn't. Other people may think that you are being strong, or that you don't care about what has happened, or question that it has happened.

**Nausea** - feeling physically sick about what has happened, what he did

**Feeling 'Dirty'** - the smell of him lingers for many days and months and survivors try to scrub it off themselves - scrub him off themselves.

### B. What happens next?

People react differently and take different amounts of time to come to terms with what has happened. You can feel all or some of the following and may not be able to explain what you are feeling because these feelings may be mixed together resulting in the survivor feeling that she is going 'mad'. All of which are misplaced.

**Fear** .... that the same thing will happen again, or that if you begin to cry you might lose control of your feelings, break down and not be able to stop crying.

**Helplessness** .... that something really terrible happened and there was nothing you could do about it. You feel helpless, vulnerable and overwhelmed about other difficulties - small and large

**Anger** .... about what has happened and sometimes with the perpetrator but more often with yourself for not preventing it or seeing it coming.

**Blame** .... yourself, you feel that you should have done something during the rape to stop it, should have fought back... should have realized he was a rapist....

**Really Distraught** .... Your understanding of safety, boundaries, human behavior has been completely destroyed, how do you begin to reassemble your belief system

**Shame** .... Because what happened was intensely personal and would have been degrading.

**Guilt** ... It was your fault that this happened, if you hadn't got drunk, worn that dress, spoken to him, went out with him, went back to his flat, kissed him, trusted him... feeling that you led him on in some way (*based on the myths of rape*).

### C. Longer Term Effects of PTSD and Definition

There are **three** main types of symptoms produced by a traumatic experience which must last longer than a **month** to be diagnosed as PTSD:

#### 1. **Re-experiencing the trauma**

Survivors re-live the event, again and again. This can happen both as a "flashback" in the day, and as nightmares when you are trying to sleep. These can be so realistic that it feels as though you are living through the experience all over again. These range from mildly disturbing memories to full blown flashbacks. In your mind you can see everything that happened - reoccurring - you can also feel the emotions and physical sensations of what happened - fear, sweating, smells, sounds, pain. Unwanted, intrusive and distressing recollections of the traumatic event which you cannot stop. Ordinary things can trigger off flashbacks, a smell, a sound, a sight, or seemingly nothing at all. For many of our clients talking about the event can trigger a flashback. You may become obsessive about cleanliness or some other ritual (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder), you may become phobic about going outside, through fear, or walking along certain streets.

#### 2. **Avoidance & Numbing**

It can be just too upsetting to re-live the experience over and over again. So you distract yourself and keep your mind busy by losing yourself in a compulsive hobby, working very hard, or spending time absorbed in physical activities, going out excessively, drinking and being entertained by anything that takes your mind off it, or talking too much about trivial things. You avoid places and people that remind you of the trauma, you can be irritable and unresponsive and you do not usually talk about what happened to you. Given the unpleasant nature of reexperiencing a traumatic event, there is a certain logic to numbing and avoidance. Unfortunately, the numbing (sometimes called emotional anesthesia) often spreads to involve many important and previously enjoyable activities in addition to those associated with the trauma. Sufferers often describe having a more restricted range of emotions with fewer highs and lows and feelings of detachment from others, including those with whom you had been close before the trauma. Avoidance may be seen as the ultimate form of numbing. You may have a loss of memory about part of what happened during the rape, or completely deny to yourself that it happened, that it was rape. Finally you may go into a deep depression.

#### 3. **Increased Arousal**

Being "on guard" and alert all the time as if looking out for danger. Survivors often have an exaggerated startled reaction to stimuli that most individuals would hardly notice i.e. someone coming up behind them and screaming. Unable to relax. This is called "hyper vigilance". Other people notice that you are jumpy and irritable. Those who have experienced trauma often describe a loss of innocence and trust in their safety and surroundings. Because of increased arousal, individuals with PTSD often have difficulty concentrating and falling or staying asleep and may display irritability because you are always on edge but may not be able to sleep. You feel exhausted.

#### **In the following weeks and months:**

Strong emotions will affect physical health so in the weeks after a trauma you will experience:

- |                               |  |                        |
|-------------------------------|--|------------------------|
| ▪ tiredness                   | ▪ Social isolation and difficulties relating to other people | ▪ heart beating faster |
| ▪ dreams and nightmares       | ▪ Low self esteem and feeling useless, not worth helping     | ▪ alcohol dependency   |
| ▪ poor concentration          | ▪ Changes in sex-drive or libido                             | ▪ drug abuse           |
| ▪ memory problems             | ▪ helplessness   | ▪ eating disorder      |
| ▪ difficulty thinking clearly |  | ▪ self harm/injury     |
| ▪ headaches                   |  | ▪ suicidal ideation    |
| ▪ changes in appetite         |  | ▪ aches & pains        |
| ▪ anger                       |  | ▪ illnesses            |

## WHAT SHOULD A SURVIVOR DO?

### **Give yourself time**

It takes time - weeks or months - to accept what has happened and to learn to live with it. You may need to grieve for what (or what part of yourself) has been lost.

### **Ask for support**

It can be a relief to talk about what happened. You can ask friends and family to do this - at first you will probably not know what to say or do and you should anticipate the various reactions you may get - 'Why did you go to his flat' to 'We have to tell the police immediately' to 'I am going to kill the .....d' to crying and blaming themselves for this happening.

### **Take some time for yourself**

At times you may want to be alone or just with those closest to you. Try to do things that you used to enjoy before the trauma or find new pleasures

### **Talk it over**

It is important to find someone you trust to support you so that you can talk about it. You should not worry if you cry - this is a perfectly normal reaction, usually helpful and it will stop. Taking things slowly - at a pace that you feel comfortable with. Using a specialist counsellor or therapist who will understand the trauma you have experienced is the healthiest option.

### **Get into a routine**

Even if you don't feel much like eating, you should try to have regular meals and to eat a balanced diet. Taking some exercise can help - but you should start gently.

### **Do some "normal" things with other people**

Sometimes you will want to be with other people who you feel 'safe' with, but this should be a time not to talk about what has happened but to try and relax in a social atmosphere. This can be part of the healing process.

### **Take care**

After a trauma people are more likely to have accidents. So be careful around the home and driving a car.

### **Believe in yourself**

Begin to believe that *it wasn't your fault, you are not to blame* and to accept that you may be angry as long as the anger is directed at the perpetrator and not yourself.

## WHAT SHOULD A SURVIVOR NOT DO?

### **Don't bottle up feelings**

Strong feelings are natural. Not to feel embarrassed about them. Bottling them up can make you feel worse and can damage your health. Try to talk about what has happened and how you feel, and not to worry if you cry.

### **Don't take on too much**

Being active can take your mind off what has happened, but you need time to think and go over what happened so that you can come to terms with it. You need to take some time to get back to your old routine.

### **Don't drink or use drugs**

Alcohol or drugs can blot out painful memories for a while, but they will stop you from coming to terms with what has happened. Alcohol is also a depressant which makes you feel worse. They can also cause other health problems.

### **Don't make any major life changes**

Try to put off any big decisions. Your judgment may not be at its best and you may make choices

that you later regret. If you need to make a big decision you should take advice from people you trust.

### **To recover from PTSD fully it is necessary to access professional help.**

Family and friends may be supportive at this time but they will be unable to give the right support to help you fully recover. Therefore, when you are still feeling the following after a month, it is time to look for a professional:

- Feelings are not returning to normal after six weeks
- Having nightmares and cannot sleep
- getting on badly with those closest to you
- staying away from other people more and more
- friends & family suggest you seek help
- having more accidents than usual
- overwhelming feelings of sadness
- poor concentration
- a sense of being vulnerable, leading to a fear of losing control
- anxiety on a daily basis
- changes in behaviour (e.g. short temper)
- changes in feelings about self (e.g. feeling useless)
- numbed responses
- reduced interest in the external world (feelings of detachment & estrangement)
- Reckless behaviour

### **Can doctors prescribe any medication to help?**

Medication can sometimes be helpful following a trauma, However, pills can only paper over the cracks and deal with the symptoms of the trauma, the way to recover is through talking remedies with a specialist.

#### **a. *Tranquillisers***

There are drugs that can help to reduce anxiety. They can also help survivors get off to sleep. They are called "tranquillisers". Common ones include *Diazepam (Valium)*, *lorazepam (Ativan)* and *Temazepam*. In the short term tranquilisers can help survivors to feel less anxious and to sleep. However, if they are used for too long they may lose their effectiveness and stop working and more and more have to be taken to get the same effect which could result in an addiction to them.

#### **b. *Antidepressants***

Survivors can become ill with depression following a trauma. Depression is different from normal sadness - it is worse, it also affects physical health and it goes on for longer. Depression can be treated with either antidepressant medication, or with talking treatments such as counselling or psychotherapy.

### **Why are traumatic events so shocking?**

They undermine our sense that life is fair, reasonably safe, that we are secure and that we understand our surroundings and the people in it. A traumatic experience makes it very clear that we can die at any time. The symptoms of PTSD are part of a normal reaction to feeling that we narrowly avoided death.

### **Does everyone get PTSD after a traumatic experience?**

No. But nearly everyone will have the symptoms of post traumatic stress for the first month or so. Thereafter, recovery is dependent on the resources of the survivor themselves. Do you have a good support network, people you can talk openly with, have you had any other traumas in your life that have been triggered by this present event. Are you used to coping on your own? About 1 in 3 people will find that their symptoms just carry on and that you can't come to terms with what has happened. It is as though the recovery process has got stuck. The trauma has been too

overwhelming. The symptoms of post traumatic stress, although normal in themselves, become a problem - or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder - when they go on for too long.

### What makes PTSD worse?

On top of the above, the more disturbing the experience, the more likelihood of developing PTSD:

- trauma went on for a long time (hostage situation, being imprisoned and raped )
- being trapped and physically unable to get away (gang rape)
- trauma is sudden and unexpected (acquaintance or date rape, stranger rape)
- raped by a close family member over a long period

### Why does PTSD happen?

We don't know for certain. There are a several possible explanations for why PTSD occurs.

#### Psychological

When we are frightened, we remember things very clearly. Although it can be distressing to remember these things, it can help us to understand what happened and, in the long run, help us to survive.

- ◆ The flashbacks, or replays, force us to think about what has happened. We can decide what to do if it happens again. After a while, we learn to think about it without becoming upset.
- ◆ It is tiring and distressing to remember a trauma. Avoidance and numbing keep the number of replays down to a manageable level.
- ◆ Being "on guard" means that we can react quickly if another crisis happens. We sometimes see this happening with survivors of an earthquake, when there may be second or third shocks. It can also give us the energy for the work that's needed after an accident or crisis.

But we don't want to spend the rest of our life going over it. We only want to think about it when we have to - if we find ourselves in a similar situation.

#### Physical

- ◆ Adrenaline is a hormone our bodies produce when we are under stress. It "pumps up" the body to prepare it for action. When the stress disappears, the level of adrenaline should go back to normal. In PTSD, it may be that the vivid memories of the trauma keep the levels of adrenaline high. This will make a person tense, irritable, and unable to relax or sleep well.
- ◆ The hippocampus is a part of the brain that processes memories. High levels of stress hormones, like adrenaline, can stop it from working properly - like "blowing a fuse". This means that flashbacks and nightmares continue because the memories of the trauma can't be processed. If the stress goes away and the adrenaline levels get back to normal, the brain is able to repair the damage itself, like other natural healing processes in the body. The disturbing memories can then be processed and the flashbacks and nightmares will slowly disappear.

### How can PTSD be helped?

Therapy with a qualified and experienced counsellor or psychotherapist is the only way to recover. After or during therapy and when you are feeling better about yourself



#### **Do.....**

- ◆ keep life as normal as possible
- ◆ get back to a usual routine
- ◆ talk about what happened to someone you trust
- ◆ try relaxation exercises
- ◆ go back to work / college / school
- ◆ eat and exercise regularly (encourages serotonin)
- ◆ take time to be with family and friends

#### **Don't.....**

- ◆ beat yourself up about it - PTSD symptoms are not a sign of weakness. They are a normal reaction, of normal people, to terrifying experiences
- ◆ bottle up feelings .
- ◆ avoid talking about it.
- ◆ expect the memories to go away immediately, they may be with you for quite some time.

<b>Do.....</b>	<b>Don't.....</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ drive with care - your concentration may be poor</li><li>◆ be more careful generally - accidents are more likely at this time</li><li>◆ expect to get better.</li><li>◆ be good to yourself</li><li>◆ remember that you have ambitions, hopes and dreams that can be fulfilled</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>◆ expect too much of yourself. Cut yourself a bit of slack while you adjust to what has happened.</li><li>◆ stay away from other people.</li><li>◆ drink lots of alcohol or coffee or smoke more.</li><li>◆ get overtired/do things to excess</li><li>◆ miss meals/eat rubbish</li><li>◆ Make huge decisions/life changing i.e. moving house</li></ul>

### WHAT CAN INTERFERE WITH RECOVERY?

Other people may hold you back so make sure that you are surrounded only by supportive individuals. You may find that sometimes other people will:

- be angry with you
- think you should be 'over it now'
- blame you
- not let you talk about it because it is uncomfortable for them.
- avoid you because you do not know what to say.
- tell you what you should do to feel better
- want to take control of the situation
- blame themselves for what happened

Or if you have sought professional help:

- the therapist may not be qualified or specialised
- you do not feel comfortable with your therapist - in which case find a new one
- not doing anything, believing 'time will heal'
- hiding yourself away and believing you are keeping yourself 'safe'
- think you can 'forget about it'
- believing it was your fault this happened to you

### HOW WILL YOU KNOW THAT PTSD HAS GONE?

- When you can think about what happened without becoming distressed
- When you do not feel constantly under threat
- When you do not think about it at inappropriate times and unexpectedly
- When you can put it out of your mind and do other things easily
- When you feel more in control of your life
- When you feel better about yourself
- When the flashbacks have gone
- When you can sleep restfully during the night
- When you know that the perpetrator was to blame
- When you can trust your instincts again
- When you can look to the future, have aims and goals and believe that you WILL achieve them.

Rape Crisis Centres are always here to help.