



Understanding PTSD for Family and Friends

This leaflet is designed for family and friends of those who have experienced a traumatic event, and developed a condition known as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Trying to support a person through PTSD can be confusing and distressing, and you may be struggling to know how best to support your loved one through this difficult time, and while they receive treatment.

At The Treatment Network (TTN), we've put together some information to help you navigate this confusing time.

What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

PTSD is often experienced following a traumatic event. A person experiences a strong emotional reaction, such as feeling scared, helpless or shocked about an event and regardless of the outcome, this can trigger PTSD symptoms. There are many types of trauma, including different accidents, assault, witnessing someone being harmed or natural disasters.

What makes an experience traumatic is how it felt to the person going through it at that time. For example, if they thought they were going to die during the event, however unlikely this may seem with hindsight, the event will be traumatic.

Such stressful events come as a big emotional shock and it's normal to be very shaken up afterwards. Sometimes these feelings will fade with time, but for some people these symptoms stay or actually increase. The person experiences a change in thoughts, feelings and physical symptoms which then affects their behaviour. When a

person's response to an event doesn't fade with time, they may be experiencing PTSD.

Typical Symptoms of PTSD:




- Flashbacks-** These are like video replays in the mind, and can sometimes feel to the person that they are experiencing the trauma again. These memories are easily triggered by everyday experiences, so can seem to be beyond the person's control and extremely frightening. In treatment, the therapist will support the person and help them process their experiences of the event in order to reduce their flashbacks.
- Sleep-** Difficulties with sleep are extremely common following a trauma. These can include; difficulties getting to sleep, waking during the night, nightmares and cold sweats, and waking early in the morning. The person's body has remained in a high alert state following the trauma, which makes it harder to relax and unwind. In particular, nightmares act as flashbacks and can often be replays of the event, causing the person to wake up in distress.
- Hyper-awareness-** Following a traumatic event, the person may perceive the world as more frightening, and constantly expect danger. This may lead them to minimising risks, or appearing jittery, especially when reminded of the event.
- Anger-** This is a common reaction to traumatic experiences, and you may notice your loved one becoming more easily angry and upset. Through treatment, this symptom should start to improve as the person comes to terms with their experience.
- Feeling sad and low-** Emotional changes are common after a trauma, and you may feel concerned when noticing these fluctuations in mood. The person may appear to have changed significantly which can be upsetting and frightening. Progressing through treatment, and processing their traumatic experience, will improve these emotional changes.
- Loss of interest-** This is often linked to feeling sad and low as well as feeling regularly flooded with strong emotions like fear and anxiety. You may notice that the person does not seem to seek out your company as often or no longer wants to participate in the pastimes that you shared before the trauma. Spouses and partners may notice a loss of interest in sex, and children may notice that their parent doesn't seem to play with them anymore.
- Alcohol and Drugs-** The use of alcohol and drugs is common when coping with PTSD symptoms. It helps the person to cope with the strong emotions they are left experiencing. Ultimately it doesn't solve the problem, and can have worsening effects on the person's symptoms such as increased sleep disturbance and anxiety.

What does Treatment Involve?

The recommended treatments for the outlined PTSD symptoms listed above are called Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) or Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR).



There are three parts to these treatments:

-  **Establishing safety:** helping people to develop skills to deal with their memories and overwhelming feelings.
-  **Processing the traumatic memory:** talking through or thinking about the experience, and the thoughts, feelings and sensations associated with the memory.
-  **Reconnecting with life:** helping the person get back to positive activities in their life, in order to start moving forward, and regain independence and control.

These treatments can be challenging because they involve the person with PTSD talking about their traumatic experience and reliving the event again. In the course of therapy, they will work with the therapist on doing things that they have avoided since the trauma (e.g., driving after a road traffic accident; leaving the house after dark after an assault) to help them regain confidence and control of their lives. Supporting your loved one at this time can really help them to cope with the treatment.

The aim of the treatment is to support the person to become better able to manage their emotions about the trauma, and start to engage more fully with the activities they enjoyed before their traumatic experience.

It is important to acknowledge that not all people will want (or have to) talk about what happened to them. Sometimes, restabilising safety in their lives or reconnecting to purposeful activities can help people with PTSD overcome the trauma.

Looking after yourself:

Supporting someone with these difficulties can be very challenging and upsetting. It may have an impact on your wellbeing, and it's important to take care and seek support as much as possible at this time. Ensure you take time for yourself to enjoy fun activities and relax.



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