

Understanding Trauma and PTSD

This leaflet is designed to give you more of an understanding about trauma and PTSD, and the treatments available to help you regain control of your life.

What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

PTSD can develop following a traumatic event, such as a road traffic accident, assault, or other distressing experience. At the time of the event, the individual might feel frightened, overwhelmed or out of control, and following the experience, survivors of trauma can continue to feel a range of emotions including fear, anger, guilt or vulnerability.

These feelings are common and will often resolve themselves with time, but for some people, the symptoms can become more problematic and develop into PTSD which can require professional help to manage.

PTSD has four main symptoms:

- 📍 Reliving memories or feelings from the trauma, including flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive pictures or thoughts about the accident
- 📍 A heightened sense of threat and vigilance, feeling as if something bad is about to happen and looking out for danger
- 📍 Avoidance, including avoiding certain places or activities associated with the incident, or avoiding thinking or talking about the traumatic event
- 📍 Changes in beliefs about yourself, the world and other people, including having negative thoughts about yourself and finding it difficult to plan for the future

Memories of Traumatic Events

Memory processing is like films playing on a movie projector. Our memories are like films that play in our minds.



With most memories, we have control over which films to play and when to start and stop them. However after traumatic events, we may want to avoid watching anything related to the distressing experience, but feel that we no longer have control over the start and stop buttons. It can feel like someone else is deciding what we watch, and when, and this lack of control can make us try even harder to stop the movie playing at all, suppressing the memory that constantly repeats in our minds.

Treatment for PTSD

Trauma focused therapy usually involves the following elements:

- 📍 **Grounding and Stabilisation-** Developing strategies to manage anxiety and the stress responses associated with trauma. This can include relaxation, mindfulness and developing a sense of safety.
- 📍 **Working through the memories-** Following trauma, most people want to avoid thinking about the traumatic event. However, it is usually necessary to work through the negative thoughts and feelings to 'process' the memory by talking, imagining or writing about it.
- 📍 **Reconnecting with your life:** It is common after trauma for people to start avoiding things that make them feel anxious or unsafe. This can lead to life feeling limited, and isolating, which in turn can result in low mood. Within treatment, you will set goals to gradually overcome this avoidance in order to start re-engaging in previously enjoyed activities and planning for the future.

Treatment for PTSD involves learning to take back control of the movie projector so that you can watch the traumatic events again at your own pace and in a way that feels safe for you. Developing grounding and coping skills is an important part of trauma focused therapy. Before you're asked to remember or work through the memories, your therapist will help you to develop resources to keep you safe in the process.

Remember, not everybody has to talk, draw or write about their trauma in order to feel better. You are always in control of your treatment.

