

Understanding trauma and how it affects us

What is trauma?

Trauma can be any distressing or threatening event or series of events that overwhelms a person's ability to cope. You may have experienced it directly or witnessed or heard about it happening to someone else.

- Childhood abuse or neglect (emotional, physical, sexual)
- Domestic violence
- Physical or sexual assault
- Torture
- War and combat
- Natural disasters
- Road traffic accident

What happens after a traumatic or stressful event?

People who have been traumatised experience a **normal reaction to an abnormal situation**. Our minds and our bodies react how they are biologically programmed to in the face of threat, but sometimes this can become stuck and people carry on reacting as if the danger is still happening. Trauma can affect how we feel, think and relate to others.

After experiencing a traumatic event many people may experience intense feelings of fear, have nightmares or flashbacks to the event. They may struggle to sleep, feel jumpy and on edge and scared or irritable. Alternatively they may feel a sense of detachment to the world around them. These feelings are generally temporary and are a useful process in helping us learn from and respond to threats. These responses are natural reactions and help our bodies and minds to process what has happened and to cope with the threat that has been experienced.

Sometimes difficulties may persist for longer than a month and continue to have an impact on everyday life and a person may be diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD). This is because the memory is continuously being activated and triggering the same fear (the sensory memory) or because they still feel in danger (the world seems more dangerous or people feel more vulnerable than before).

What might make people more at risk to developing difficulties later on?

It's hard to predict who who may go on to develop PTSD although there are some factors that may make this more likely. People that are not able to talk through what has happened to them and feel supported and believed may be less likely to learn emotional coping strategies and feel able to put what has happened behind them. People who have experienced previous trauma or have a family history of trauma may not have supportive systems or have learned emotional coping strategies to support them

'Squeeze any human hard enough and they will be overwhelmed'
Steve Haines, 2016

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to process what has happened to them. There is also evidence that suggests the severity, intensity and perceived threat to life of the traumatic event along with a sense of helplessness may increase the likelihood for PTSD. Where traumatic events have been prolonged or repeated or someone has experienced multiple different traumatic events throughout their life, they are also more likely to go on to develop PTSD. How people manage after a traumatic event and the support they are able to access may also reduce the potential for later difficulties.

What is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

It can be helpful to think about PTSD with regards to three main ways that people react to cope with trauma; difficulties with memories and intrusions (including flashbacks and nightmares), difficulties with emotions (feeling fearful, jumpy or numb) and avoiding things that have become reminders of what has happened.

- **Re-experiencing traumatic memories**

Trauma memories are different to normal memories – they are stored, triggered and experienced differently. They tend to be more sensory (what you saw, heard, smelled, felt) and can be disorganised and confusing. They can get activated by association (triggers) and can seem out of control and intense (flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, disjointed memories, only one part of the memory is activated).

- **Feeling tense, irritable or on edge**

Many people experience intense fear, sometimes as part of a memory or as part of an on-going sense of something bad going to happen (a new traumatic event, feeling out of control, struggling with symptoms). Often people can also feel that they have been in some way to blame for what happened. This can trigger other intense feelings such as anger. Many people also experience, at times, the complete opposite – feeling nothing or feeling numb.

- **Avoiding things associated with the trauma**

A common consequence of trauma and trauma symptoms is the avoidance of anything that reminds the person of the event or anything that could trigger symptoms. This can result in a general reduction of activities, even those that were previously enjoyed.

What is Complex PTSD (C-PTSD)?

Some people experience multiple traumatic events over a long period of time sometimes early on in childhood. Sometimes the person abusing them is also the person that they need to rely on for comfort and to be looked after by.

The diagram below describes some of the difficulties people who have experienced complex trauma may have. They were often developed as creative ways to cope with traumatic experiences as the person may not have had the chance to learn more helpful ways of coping.

Uncertain sense of self and identity

It can feel difficult to have a clear sense of who you are as you may have needed to shut off from parts of yourself or adapt to those around you in order to survive. This may leave someone who has experienced complex trauma feeling fragmented or that they do not have a clear sense of who they are.

Dissociation

If you are unable to escape a traumatic event, you may switch off and go somewhere else in your mind. This is a natural way to manage overwhelming situations that we are unable to control. If this is used a lot in childhood, as an adult this can become the primary way to cope with stressful situations or strong emotions. You may feel disconnected to your body, the world or others and struggle to remember key things that have happened to you.

Hearing voices and other unusual experiences

Some people may hear, see or sense something that others around them are not. This may be related to re-experiencing memories of abuse or trauma, particularly when these are hostile or critical. Voices may sound like the abuser or say things the abuser might have said or express feelings of guilt or shame that someone has about themselves as a result of what has happened to them.

Difficulties understanding and managing emotions

You may struggle to know what you are feeling or feel that your emotions are very intense and out of control. Feelings may be overwhelming and difficult to cope with. You may find it very difficult to calm yourself down or to feel reassured that your feelings will pass. Sometimes people may turn to self-harming, drugs or alcohol to cope with or get rid of such intense feelings.

Shame and self criticism

You may feel you are to blame in some way for what happened to you and that it is your fault. This is a normal way that people react to traumatic events as they try to make sense of what has happened. This can have an impact on how people feel towards themselves and they may struggle with low self esteem and self-worth as a result.

Loss of sense of safety and danger cues

The world does not feel like a safe place. You may feel constantly on the look out for things to go wrong or have strong beliefs about people who might harm you. It may also might feel difficult to know what might be dangerous or how you can protect yourself.

Difficulties developing close and trusting relationships with others

If you have been let down or abused by people in the past, it makes sense that you will have trouble trusting others and developing intimate relationships where you are able to be vulnerable. It may feel safer to push people away or attack them rather than let them in. However, you also might feel you need others in order to cope and feel safe. People may also find themselves in relationships as an adult that remind them of relationships they were in as a child. This may be an unconscious attempt to repair things that happened in the hope that there will be a different outcome.

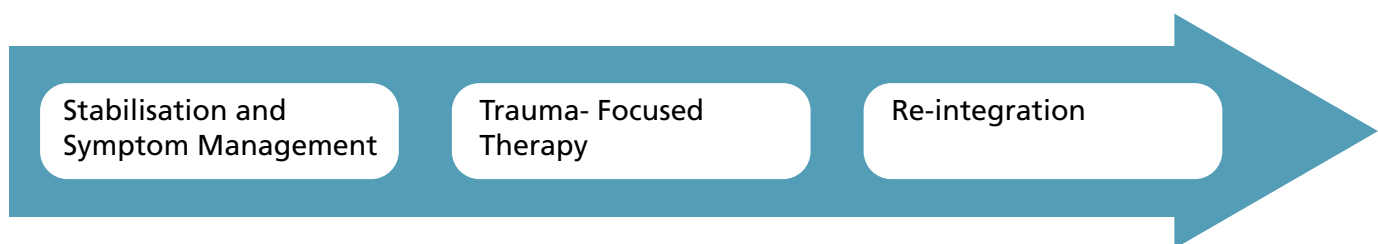
Difficulties with concentration and attention

Growing up in fear may make it more difficult for people to learn to focus or feel able to work towards completing long term goals. You may find yourself easily distracted or startled and struggling to stick to tasks.



Recovering from trauma and PTSD

It is very important to remember that you **can** recover from trauma and go on to lead a fulfilling life worth living and develop positive and trusting relationships with others. You may not be able to change what has happened to you, but you can process your feelings about it so that these do not affect you in the same way. Often treatment for trauma follows three stages (although these may overlap); an initial stabilisation stage where you learn about trauma and how to manage some of the difficult symptoms associated with it, before moving on to trauma focused therapy where you discuss what has happened to you and how this has affected you in more detail; and then a re-integration phase to support you to develop your values and consolidate what you have learnt. Developing a relationship with your therapist may also be an important part of your treatment, in order for you to reflect on how your trauma might have affected how you relate to and trust others.



Further Reading and useful resources:

- The PODS website (Positive Outcomes for Dissociative Survivors) has a wealth of information, articles and resources relating to trauma, dissociation and flashbacks. You can access this at www.pods-online.org.uk
- The PTSD UK website also has information and resources about PTSD and trauma. You can access this at www.ptsduk.org
- Services in Cwm Taf UHB in Wales have produced useful information sheets and self help leaflets relating to trauma. You can access these at cwmtafmorgannwg.wales/services/mental-health/stabilisation-pack
- This book by Steve Haines uses images to help describe how trauma can affect the mind and body. Haines, S. (2016). *Trauma is really strange*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publisher