

If there was a death during the incident, survivors often feel guilty that they lived when others didn't. It is very important to understand that these feelings are normal and to get counselling as soon as possible.

Effects of PTSD and related problems

PTSD is negative for both the sufferer and his or her family.

Substance abuse: Many people suffering from PTSD try get rid of painful memories, loneliness and nervousness by using alcohol or other drugs as a form of self-medication. Substance abuse helps to take away feelings and memories for a little while.

Depression: Many PTSD sufferers can't get over the grief and anger after the injury or loss, and this can cause depression as the person begins to see him or herself as worthless and a failure. The symptoms of depression – like not being able to think properly, the negative views of the world, and the changes in sleeping habits – all make PTSD worse.

Suicide: A person with PTSD may feel their pain will never end. People with PTSD can be at risk for suicide.

Depression:

- Feeling sad, anxious, or "empty" mood
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed, including sex
- Trouble sleeping, or sleeping too much
- Eating too much or not eating
- No energy, feeling tired, being "slowed down"
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts
- Restlessness, irritability
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Physical symptoms like headaches, digestive disorders, and pain that don't get better with treatment

Panic disorder: Often people with PTSD suffer panic attacks, resulting from the extreme fear they felt during the traumatic event. During their attack; their throats tighten, while their breathing and heart rate increase, making them feel nauseous and dizzy. When they are exposed to places, smells, sounds, or people that remind them of the trauma, or when they have memories or flashbacks of the incident, they often have panic attacks.

Panic attack:

- Being very frightened and terrified
- Racing or pounding heartbeat
- Chest pains
- Dizziness, light-headedness
- Nausea (feeling like you want to vomit)
- Difficulty breathing
- Tingling in the hands and fingers
- Feeling very hot or feeling cold
- Fear of losing control, going "crazy" or mad, or doing something embarrassing
- Fear of dying

Treatment

It is important to be gentle on yourself and give yourself time to get better. Having lived through a trauma stresses both the mind and body. A person who has gone through a trauma cannot expect to behave and act as they normally do straight after the trauma and it is not a good time to make important decisions.

Counselling: Trauma counselling is a good way of coping with the experience. You may go for individual appointments where you can talk through the experience and work through the painful feelings such as anger, sadness and guilt. You can find good ways of coping with the symptoms.

Debriefing: Is a type of counselling when a group of people who have been through a traumatic event together. It is a group meeting that allows each group member to talk about their feelings and reactions to the event.

Steps to recovery

- Remember that the symptoms are part of the trauma – they will pass eventually.
- Feelings of guilt are normal – it's part of taking back your life. Speak to a counsellor to help you cope with these feelings.
- Talk about your experience in detail - your thoughts, feelings and fears. Tell people you are close to that you want to talk about it.
- Take control of your life as soon as possible. Avoid going on leave, and don't make any extreme life changes – it is best to face your fears and feelings rather than avoid them.
- Slowly get back to your normal habits. Do what you normally do - if you find this difficult, get the support of family and friends. It is important not to push yourself too hard, take things slowly.
- Understand this is a process – you will get better but it takes time.
- Your family and friends may also be struggling with what you've been through. Talk about it with them, and be there for each other.



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Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Treatment Guide

What is trauma and PTSD?
What can cause PTSD?
What are the symptoms of PTSD?
How to treat PTSD?



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If you are like many South Africans and have been the victim of violent crime, abuse, accidents, loss, or illness, you may be suffering from a very real illness – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD.

Many victims of trauma in South Africa don't get help because they feel embarrassed, they think that acting brave and tough is the 'manly' thing to do, they have seen so much violence that they feel 'numb', or they refuse to believe what happened.

What is trauma?

Experiences that are sudden or that we don't expect like a car accident or robbery, threaten our lives and our safety. We are also emotionally hurt – and we often feel helpless, scared, angry, and guilty.

Question: Only weak people who are unable to cope with traumatic events get PTSD.

False - PTSD can affect anyone who has gone through trauma.

Question: Everybody has been through a frightening experience and must therefore be suffering from one or more symptoms of PTSD as a result.

False - PTSD is different from normal anxiety.

Question: People have stress after a trauma, but this is not usually serious.

False - With PTSD, many people get depression, anxiety, or abuse substances, and there may be problems at work and with friends and family.



Causes of trauma

Anyone who has gone through a traumatic event, or has even witnessed something traumatic, can be affected.

There are many different events that can cause someone to react badly.

Causes of trauma

- Seeing a trauma
- Going through or seeing violence often
- Death of a loved one
- Accident – car, work, home
- Robbery
- High-jacking, smash & grab
- Natural disaster
- Work-related stress
- Unemployment
- Domestic violence
- Divorce, break up
- Having a terminal illness like cancer or AIDS
- Assault or abuse

Common feelings after a traumatic event

Most people feel certain things after a traumatic event. Normal symptoms and reactions include:

- Nightmares
- Sleeping difficulties
- Changes in appetite
- Anxiety and fear
- Irritable, agitated, or angry
- Very aware and ready to act

- No energy, feeling tired all the time
- Feeling depressed/sad mood, crying a lot of the time
- Avoiding people, places and things that remind you of the event
- Not being able to concentrate on work or normal, everyday actions
- Feeling worried about the safety of the people that you love

For most people, these symptoms get less and go away after a couple of weeks. However, if they continue for 6 weeks or longer, it may be PTSD.

Who can get PTSD?

Any traumatic event can cause PTSD and can affect anyone who has been caught up in a traumatic event. PTSD makes you re-live the pain and memories of the trauma all the time. Remember that PTSD is not a sign of weakness.

Not all people who have been through a trauma will develop PTSD or need treatment; some get better with the help of family, friends or other support. But many people need professional help to recover.

Children can also get PTSD. Domestic violence and abuse, loss of parents, war, and natural disasters impact on the lives of children.

Symptoms of PTSD

PTSD usually appears within three months of the trauma, but sometimes it may come on months or even years later. There are three groups of PTSD symptoms: intrusive symptoms, avoidance symptoms, and symptoms of hyper-arousal.

Intrusive symptoms: People suffering from PTSD may have times when the traumatic event 'takes over' their life when they have sudden, very realistic memories and painful emotions.

Flashbacks - a memory so powerful that the person feels as if the trauma is happening all over again – is a common symptom of trauma and PTSD. At times, the re-experiencing occurs in nightmares that are so real that the person wakes up screaming in terror. In children, dreams of the traumatic event are often nightmares of scary animals, or danger to people they love like friends and family.

Avoidance symptoms: PTSD sufferers often stay away from situations that may remind them of the traumatic event. A hijack victim, for example, may find it extremely frightening to drive. Over time, the person may become so scared of particular situations that his or her daily life is affected by them trying to avoid these situations.

These also affect a person's relationships with other people, because he or she will try stay away from having a close emotional relationship with family, friends and colleagues. At first, the person may feel emotionally dead, and not be able to talk about their emotions. They may seem bored, cold or busy with other things. Family members often feel rejected by the PTSD sufferer because he or she is not affectionate.

Hyper-arousal symptoms: PTSD can cause sufferers to act like they are still threatened by the trauma that caused their illness. Sufferers often become irritable, and may have trouble concentrating or remembering things. They often get insomnia which is difficulty sleeping. PTSD sufferers get frights easily - if they hear a car backfire or a fire cracker, they get very scared and hide for cover. Children may also show physical symptoms, including stomach and head pains, in addition to the symptoms of increased arousal.

Guilt: Trauma includes loss and many people can't cope with the guilt that they caused the incident or that they should have somehow stopped the trauma from happening.

