

## About PTSD

More than one-quarter of a million Australians experience posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in any one year, and around five per cent of Australians have had PTSD at some point in their lives. Serious accidents are one of the leading causes of PTSD in Australia.

### What is PTSD?

PTSD is a set of reactions that can develop in people who have experienced or witnessed an event which threatened their life or safety, or that of others around them, and led to feelings of intense fear, helplessness or horror. This can be a car or other serious accident, physical or sexual assault, war or torture, or natural disasters such as bushfires or floods. Other life changing situations such as being retrenched, getting divorced or the expected death of an ill family member, are very distressing and may cause serious mental health problems, but are not events that can cause PTSD.

Anyone can develop PTSD following a traumatic event but people are at greater risk if the event involved physical or sexual assault, they have had repeated traumatic experiences such as sexual abuse or living in a war zone, or they have experienced PTSD in the past.

### Signs and symptoms

People with PTSD often experience feelings of panic or extreme fear, which may resemble what was felt during the traumatic event. A person with PTSD has three main types of difficulties:

- Re-living the traumatic event – through unwanted and recurring memories and vivid nightmares. There may be intense emotional or physical reactions, such as sweating, heart palpitations or panic, when reminded of the event.
- Being overly alert or wound up – sleeping difficulties, irritability, lack of concentration, becoming easily startled and constantly being on the look out for signs of danger.
- Avoiding reminders of the event and feeling emotionally numb – deliberately avoiding activities, places, people, thoughts or feelings associated with the event. People may also lose interest in day-to-day activities, feel cut off and detached from friends and family, or feel flat and numb.

People with PTSD can also have what are termed 'dissociative experiences', such as:

*'...it was as though I wasn't even there...'*, *'...time was standing still...'*,  
*'...I felt like I was watching things happening from above...'*  
*'...I can't remember most of what happened...'*

A health practitioner may diagnose PTSD if a person has a number of symptoms in each of these three areas for a month or more, and they lead to significant distress, or impact on their ability to work and study, their relationships and day-to-day life.

It is not unusual for people with PTSD to experience other mental health problems at the same time. These may have developed directly in response to the traumatic event or have followed the PTSD. These additional problems are more likely to occur if PTSD has persisted for a long time. Up to 80 per cent of people who have long-standing PTSD develop additional problems, most commonly depression and anxiety. Many also start misusing alcohol or drugs as a way of coping.

***Talk to your doctor at any time if you feel very distressed or your reactions are interfering with your work and relationships.***

### **Impact of PTSD on relationships and day-to-day life**

PTSD can affect people's ability to work, perform day-to-day activities or relate to their family and friends. People with PTSD can often seem disinterested or distant as they try not to think or feel in order to block out painful memories. They may stop participating in family life, ignore offers of help or become irritable. This can lead to loved ones feeling shut out. It is important to remember that these behaviours are part of the problem. People with PTSD need the support of family and friends but may not know that they need help. There are many ways you can help someone with PTSD; a list of resources available on our website is at the end of this fact sheet.

### **Risky alcohol and drug use**

People commonly use alcohol or drugs to blunt the emotional pain that they are experiencing. Alcohol and drugs may help block out painful memories in the short term but they get in the way of recovery. For more information about where to get help with high-risk drinking or drug use, please see the list of helplines and organisations on our website.

### **Getting help**

Health professionals can help people affected by traumatic experiences. A doctor can help identify problems and refer to mental health practitioners. They can also provide practical support such as teaching relaxation and stress management. Mental health professionals can provide specialised trauma-focussed treatment. Please see the following resources and sections on our website for more information:

[PTSD treatment and recovery](#)

[Information for people with ASD & PTSD, their families and carers](#)

[PTSD Practitioner Guide](#)