

PTSD treatment and recovery

Treatment for PTSD

Many people experience some of the symptoms of PTSD in the first couple of weeks after a traumatic event but most recover on their own or with the help of family and friends. For this reason, treatment does not usually start until about two weeks after a traumatic experience. It is important during those first few days and weeks after a traumatic event to get whatever help is needed. This might include information and access to people and resources that can assist recovery. Support from family and friends may be all that is needed. Otherwise, a doctor is the best place to start, to get further help.

Screening, assessment and diagnosis

The following simple questions can help a health professional decide if it is likely that someone who has been through a traumatic event has PTSD:

- Have had nightmares about it or thought about it when you did not want to?
- Tried hard not to think about it or went out of your way to avoid situations that reminded you of it?
- Were constantly on guard, watchful or easily startled?
- Felt numb or detached from others, activities, or your surroundings?

If a person answers yes to two or more of these questions, there is a good chance that they have PTSD, (Prins, et al. (2004). The primary care PTSD screen (PC-PTSD): Development and operating characteristics. *Primary Care Psychiatry*, 9, 9-14.).

More information about screening for PTSD is available in the *PTSD Practitioner Guide* (PDF) and a list of other screening measures is available in *The Australian Guidelines for the Treatment of Adults with Acute Stress Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* available on our website.

If a person has been identified as having PTSD, the health practitioner will then make a thorough assessment by asking them about:

- The difficulties being experienced
- Other experiences or problems which may impact on wellbeing
- How these problems may be impacting on day-to-day life
- What strengths and supports the person can draw on

More information about assessment and diagnosis is available in the *PTSD Practitioner Guide* available on our website.

Wherever possible, family members should be included in the assessment process, education and treatment planning, and their own needs for care considered alongside the needs of the person presenting for treatment. This should be done with the person's consent.

Effective treatments are available

If a person feels very distressed at any time after a traumatic event, they should talk to their doctor. If they experience symptoms of PTSD that persist after two weeks a doctor or a mental health professional may discuss starting treatment for PTSD. Effective treatments are available. Most involve psychological treatment but medication can also be prescribed. Generally, it's best to start with psychological treatment rather than use medication as the first and only solution to the problem.

The cornerstone of treatment for PTSD involves confronting the traumatic memory and working through thoughts and beliefs associated with the experience. Trauma-focussed treatments can reduce PTSD symptoms, lessen anxiety and depression, and improve a person's quality of life. They are also effective for people who have experienced prolonged or repeated traumatic events, but more time may be needed.

Drug treatments should not be used within four weeks of symptoms appearing unless the severity of the person's distress cannot be managed by psychological means alone.

For information on how long treatment may take, medication and the treatment of other mental health problems that may occur with PTSD, please visit our website for the following resources:

- PTSD Practitioner Guide (Fact sheet)
- The Australian Guidelines for the Treatment of Adults with Acute Stress Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder
- Information for People with ASD and PTSD
- PTSD Treatment programs for veterans and military personnel (Fact sheet)