

People who have been through a traumatic event can experience a number of emotional difficulties. In the days following a trauma, people may feel shock and disbelief at what has happened or they can feel numb, as if things are unreal.

After this time, intense and ongoing emotional reactions may appear. It is important to know that it is not uncommon to experience these reactions and that for most people, they decrease over time. If intense reactions last for more than a month and interfere with your ability to function in your life and relationships, you may have PTSD.

A person with PTSD has four main types of difficulties:

- Reliving the traumatic event - through unwanted and recurring memories or 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 - including sleeping difficulties, irritability, lack of concentration, becoming easily startled and constantly being on the lookout for signs of danger.
- Avoiding reminders of the event - avoiding activities, places, people, thoughts or feelings associated with the event.
- Experiencing negative thoughts and feelings – including unrealistic expectations of themselves or other people, unjustly blaming themselves or others for the trauma or the consequences of the trauma or feeling distant or detached from other people or losing interest in activities they used to enjoy.

People with PTSD can also experience a loss of interest in day to day activities. They can feel cut off from family and friends and feel flat or numb.

Understanding why PTSD occurs

A traumatic event is beyond the normal experience of most people and one that can produce a great deal of shock and stress. After you experience trauma, your mind automatically tries to process and digest what happened, and tries to somehow make sense of the event. It does this by allowing memories of the traumatic event to come into the mind frequently. By thinking about the event, and coming to terms with what happened, the memory will gradually fade.

However, you may have found your mind's attempts to process the trauma far too stressful. As a result, you try to stop the "processing" by avoiding thinking about the trauma, and avoiding things that may remind you of it. The problem with avoidance though, is that if you do not allow your mind to process and digest what happened, memories of what happened keep intruding. As you may have already discovered, no matter how hard you try to push away thoughts about the trauma, they always come back to haunt you through nightmares, or intrusive thoughts or images.

Getting help

There is evidence that there are effective treatments available to help people overcome PTSD. Two effective treatments for PTSD are trauma-focussed cognitive behavioural therapy (TF-CBT) and eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR). These approaches recognise that the way we think and act affects the way we feel. During this therapy you will learn:

- Ways to help digest and confront the painful memories, thoughts and images so they don't continue to distress you.
- Strategies to help you resume activities or visit places that you have avoided since the trauma because it has been too distressing.

The therapy may involve 8-12 weekly sessions with a mental health professional but may require longer depending on your needs. Your doctor may also have suggested medication which can be of assistance in managing feelings associated with PTSD.

Self-management resources

Below is a list of internet and other written resources that may help you, together with the treatment recommended by your doctor.

- Open Arms (<https://www.openarms.gov.au/>) has information on mental health and wellbeing, wellbeing programs, smartphone apps and information booklets.
- Phoenix Australia - Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health website <phoenixaustralia.org> has useful fact sheets and treatment guidelines. You can also download Recovery after Trauma: A Guide for People with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.
- PTSD Coach Australia smartphone app has been developed by DVA for use in conjunction with other PTSD interventions. It is available from <https://www.openarms.gov.au/resources/mobile-apps/ptsd-coach-australia-app>

Open Arms - Veterans & Families counselling can be reached 24 hours a day across Australia for crisis support and counselling. Call 1800 011 046.