

Post-traumatic stress

What is it?

Being involved in a traumatic incident (such as an accident or assault) is likely to lead to feeling upset, distressed or confused, which is known as an 'intense stress reaction'. It's not unusual for people to feel emotionally numb immediately after the event, carrying on as though nothing has happened – sometimes the delayed response can be much later, even years afterwards - but then the feelings of distress or upset emerge. These feelings can be intense but they can disappear after a while. If they continue for more than 4-6 weeks, or are severe, it is advisable to see your GP to discuss your symptoms and potential treatment options.

Why does it occur?

It is the way by which our mind and body processes the event, to try to make sense of it, so that we can eventually react to it in a less distressing way. The symptoms of post-traumatic stress can vary and may include some of the following:

- numbed responses
- intrusive thoughts about the event
- 'flashbacks' - feeling or behaving as if the event were happening again
- difficulty sleeping
- nightmares
- changes in behaviour (e.g. short temper)
- changes in feelings about yourself (e.g. feeling useless)
- changes in work effectiveness (e.g. poor concentration)
- lack of interest in the outside world (e.g. feelings of detachment and estrangement)
- a heightened alertness
- a sense of being vulnerable, leading to a fear of losing control
- avoiding activities and/or places that remind you of the event. Although distressing and upsetting, these are normal reactions to an extraordinary event.

How does your body help you cope?

Numbness

At first you may be numb because your mind can only gradually allow you to feel the experience. So the event may feel unreal, as if it couldn't have happened to you. But as your experience becomes more real in your mind, there is a need to make sense of the event by thinking and talking about it and, at night, dreaming about it over and over again. But, some people are unable to process the enormity of what happened to them and the trauma is never dealt with.

Activity

Being active, maybe through helping and giving to others, may give some relief. And doing things routinely can give a sense of normality. But over-activity is also a way of diverting attention from the fact that you might need help yourself.

How can you help yourself?

- Allow yourself to express your emotions safely.
- Try to establish a routine: eat, sleep and exercise regularly
- Express your needs clearly and honestly to friends, family, tutors, colleagues, etc. and allow yourself to accept their support
- Take time out to rest, think, and be with close friends and family who are supportive.
- As well as spending time with others, you'll sometimes want to be alone in order to deal with your feelings: privacy (as opposed to isolation) is also important.
- Try to keep your life as normal as possible after the experience.

When to seek further help

You should notice a gradual return to how you were before the event but it is advisable to seek professional advice if you experience any of the following for longer than 4-6 weeks:

- feeling disturbed by intense feelings or body sensations that you can no longer tolerate
- your emotions are not falling into place, and you feel very tense, confused, empty, or exhausted
- you continue to be numb and don't have feelings appropriate to a situation

- you have to keep active in order not to feel distressed
- you continue to have nightmares and poor sleep
- you have no-one to share your feelings with and feel the need to do so
- your relationships seem to be suffering, or sexual problems develop
- if you have accidents
- you smoke, drink or take medication/ non-prescribed drugs to excess since the event
- your work performance suffers.