

# Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress

## What is trauma?

A trauma is an event or series of events that involve fear or threat. Traumas include: child abuse, sexual or physical assault, witnessing violence, disasters, serious accidents, violent crime, and the sudden or violent death of a loved one.

## What is Posttraumatic Stress (PTS)?

PTS is reactions to trauma. These reactions can occur if the trauma happened to the person, the trauma was witnessed or if the trauma happened to someone very close.

PTS can include:

- Upsetting and unwanted memories of the trauma
- Nightmares or feeling like it is happening all over again (flashbacks)
- Trying not to think about the trauma
- Avoiding reminders of the trauma even when they are not dangerous
- Having changes in mood such as being scared, confused, sad, ashamed or angry a lot
- Being hyper alert, jumpy, nervous, on edge
- Trouble sleeping or concentrating
- Blaming yourself for what happened
- Thinking you are a bad person because of what happened
- Not trusting people
- Worry that it will happen again

## What causes PTS?

PTS is caused by the memory of the trauma, the feelings connected to the memories or reminders, and by how the person makes sense out of the trauma.

## Is PTS normal?

It is normal to have reactions to a trauma. Most people are upset after a trauma. Some have stronger reactions than others. No matter how a person reacts in the beginning it is still possible to recover.

## When is PTS a serious problem?

PTS is usually worst right after the trauma and then gradually gets better. After a few weeks or months, most of the time, PTS is not a big problem. When PTS does not get better or if it gets worse, then professional help may be necessary. When PTS does not get better over time it can become Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

## **What is PTSD?**

PTSD is a psychological condition that involves intense upsetting memories including nightmares and flashbacks; persistent avoidance of thoughts or reminders; high levels of hyper vigilance and jumpiness; negative beliefs about yourself or others because of the trauma; negative mood because of the trauma; sleep or concentration problems; irritability. The symptoms interfere with functioning in everyday life situations.

## **What helps with PTS?**

It helps to understand the reactions so they do not seem so strange or abnormal. Tips for managing PTS:

- Remind yourself that the trauma is over and you are not in danger now
- Tell yourself you did the best you could in the situation
- Learn about your trauma reminders so you can be ready to handle them
- Practice stopping and calming down when you have reactions
- Try not to avoid reminders or situations as long as they are safe
- Let someone who is supportive know what they can do to help you feel safe and be safe

## **When is professional help needed?**

If the PTS symptoms persist without getting better or get worse and they are interfering with functioning at home and in the community. If a person develops PTSD, professional help is usually necessary.

## **What is the treatment?**

There are effective treatments for PTSD. The counseling treatments are brief (usually 12-20 sessions), structured and trauma-focused. Medication can also be helpful. If you decided to seek treatment, make sure to check that the therapist or doctor is familiar with the evidence-based treatment approaches so that you get the highest quality care.

## **Long term impact of trauma**

Traumas are often significant life experiences. Passage of time or treatment does not change the fact that the trauma happened, or that it was very hard experience to go through. In some cases there are permanent changes in outlook and lifestyle like being more aware of safety. This is not always bad. The goal of treatment is to lower distress, help put the experience into perspective and help with return to normal functioning.