

PTSD

WHAT IS PTSD?

PTSD is commonly associated with, and was first ascribed to, war veterans suffering from 'shell shock' and 'combat fatigue'. It is a serious and often debilitating medical condition that can occur in anyone who has experienced a traumatic event themselves or have witnessed or heard of a traumatic event involving someone they are close to.

Most people have experienced a terrifying or traumatic event at some point in their lives. Initially, they may have difficulty coping with the trauma but usually, with time, emotions related to the traumatic event tend to decrease. Gradually feeling better, they tend to get on with life.

However, some people struggle to escape the experience, remaining anxious and severely distressed for an extended period to the extent that it may impact their ability to function in everyday life. If this is the case, they may have a medical condition known as PTSD.

Traumatic events may include:

- Violence (rape, physical assault, domestic abuse, kidnapping, or the violence associated with military combat)
- Natural disasters (floods, earthquakes, tornadoes or hurricanes)
- Serious accidents such as a car crash or house fire causing injury or death
- Sudden or unexpected death of a partner, friend or family member
- Diagnosis of a life-threatening illness

HOW PTSD AFFECTS DAILY FUNCTIONING

For someone with PTSD, mentally reliving an event can be as traumatic as the actual event.

The physical and psychological symptoms associated with such an experience are worsened by feelings of embarrassment, confusion and frustration and can drastically affect a person's ability to function at work, at school, and in the home.

Living with PTSD can place significant strain on relationships as people with PTSD tend to withdraw from everyday social and interpersonal activities. Often co-occurring with depression, substance abuse or other anxiety disorders, in extreme cases, if untreated, PTSD can become so distressing that the person attempts suicide.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF PTSD

During a trauma, your body responds by going into threat sensitivity 'fight' or 'flight' mode. PTSD keeps your brain stuck in threat sensitivity mode and keeps the body on high alert, overreacting to potential threats, long after the traumatic event has taken place.

3 core symptoms

Reliving or re-experiencing the traumatic event through intrusive memories, flashbacks or recurrent dreams and nightmares, and experiencing feelings and behaviours as intensely as if they were actually happening.

Avoidance of anything associated with the traumatic event, experiencing a feeling of emotional numbness towards others, losing interest in activities, and steering away from people and places that could remind them of it.

Hyperarousal symptoms include difficulty falling or staying asleep, irritability or outbursts of anger, difficulty concentrating, hyper-vigilance, and an exaggerated startle response.

WHO IS AFFECTED?

Worldwide, PTSD potentially affects people of all ages including children and from all socio-economic backgrounds. However, women are twice as likely to develop the condition as men. In South Africa, as a result of the high violent crime rate (physical and sexual assault, hijacking and domestic violence) PTSD diagnoses are relatively common with reported rates as high as 20%. Importantly, not everyone exposed to trauma will develop PTSD.

DIAGNOSING PTSD

PTSD is a disorder characterised by very specific symptoms but it can be misdiagnosed. It is critical therefore that you consult a healthcare professional if symptoms persist for a month or more.

Someone suffering from PTSD is likely to experience various symptoms that ultimately lead to a formal diagnosis. Chronic PTSD applies to cases where symptoms persist for 3 months or more.

In other cases, symptoms do not present until several months or years after the trauma. This is known as delayed onset PTSD.

