

Understanding PTSD and CPTSD
Information for individuals, partners,
families and friends

NCMH
National Centre for Mental Health
Canolfan Iechyd Meddwl Genedlaethol

Understanding PTSD and CPTSD

Created in partnership with



**Straen
Trawmatig
Cymru**

**Traumatic
Stress
Wales**



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Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the name given to a mental health condition that some people develop after they have experienced a major traumatic event.

PTSD is a common mental health condition, with studies estimating that 7% of people will develop PTSD at some point in their lifetime; up to one third of people who have experienced a traumatic event go on to develop PTSD.

What is a traumatic event?

A traumatic event could be when a person experiences or witnesses a single incident that threatens or causes death, serious injury or sexual violence, or many incidents that have happened over weeks, months or years.

Examples of traumatic events include:

- childhood abuse, including emotional neglect
- natural and man-made disasters
- childbirth experiences
- physical assault
- civil war, unrest, or torture
- road traffic accidents
- domestic violence
- sexual assault
- first responder or military events
- terrorist attacks
- life threatening illness or injury
- or any catastrophic situation

Features of PTSD

People with PTSD can suffer with different types of symptoms. These include:

- re-experiencing the trauma
- avoidance of thoughts
- memories and reminders of the trauma and a persistent feeling of ongoing threat

Distressing memories, feelings and nightmares of the trauma

People with PTSD often re-experience the traumatic event in the present, in the form of repeated and intrusive distressing memories of the trauma, even when they are trying not to think about it.

There may be a feeling of reliving the traumatic event through flashbacks, where the person may lose track with the here-and-now and feel as though they are back in the traumatic event. This can be very disorientating and upsetting.

People can also struggle with distressing nightmares of the traumatic event that can wake them up from sleep and be so distressing that they cannot get back to sleep.

Avoiding thinking, remembering and reminders of the trauma

A person with PTSD may want to avoid thinking about or remembering a traumatic event, and try to push these thoughts and memories aside in their mind.

There may be things that the person wants to avoid doing or being around in case that thing triggers a distressing memory; these are all examples of avoidance and often lead to a person's life becoming restricted in terms of what they can still comfortably do.

Avoidance is also one of the things that stops someone from being able to recover from a traumatic event.



Still feeling in danger after the trauma

People with PTSD often feel a sense that even though the traumatic event is over, things continue to feel dangerous.

We call this an ongoing sense of threat. As a result of this feeling, people with PTSD may feel constantly on-edge and unable to let their guard down.

They might be very easily startled if there is a sudden noise, and constantly looking for potential danger in their surroundings; we call these sorts of behaviours hypervigilance.

For people with PTSD, these features cause significant problems in being able to function in their personal, family, social, educational or work life.

Other features of PTSD

Struggles with sleep

People with PTSD often struggle with their sleep, finding it difficult to fall asleep and stay asleep for long enough. This might be because of a combination of not being able to relax, and having nightmares waking them up from sleep.

disconnected from other people. They may also blame themselves for what happened, and feel guilty, disgusted or ashamed, even if it wasn't their fault. Sometimes these thoughts and feelings can have an impact upon their relationships.

Thoughts and feelings can impact relationships

People with PTSD often have difficult emotions like feeling irritable and angry or numb and

Memories

Some people with PTSD may not remember significant parts of the traumatic event, whilst others will think about the event all the time, which might stop them from coming to terms with it (they may, for

example, ask themselves why the event happened to them or how it could have been avoided).

Feeling disconnected

Sometimes people with PTSD can feel so overwhelmed that they feel disconnected from their body or sense of themselves. This can include:

- going into a daze
- losing track of time
- feeling like surrounding are dream-like or changed
- not remembering what they were doing while this was going on

We call this type of experience dissociation; it is a common feature in many mental health conditions, and it usually does not last for very long.

Multiple conditions

It is not uncommon for people with PTSD to also have other mental and physical health conditions such as:

- depression
- anxiety
- problems using drugs and alcohol
- heart disease
- gut health issues
- chronic pain conditions





Features of CPTSD

People with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) have the symptoms of PTSD but also disturbances in self organisation that are described below.

Regulating emotions

People with CPTSD can struggle to cope with distressing feelings, and their usual strategies to calm down and regulate their feelings don't work as well.

This means that relatively small triggers can lead to overwhelming feelings or feeling numb and detached. This often stems from a sense of being permanently unsafe, an associated state of hyper-vigilance and an inability to relax, and a belief one will soon experience catastrophic life-events.

Negative thoughts and feelings

Traumatic events, particularly those associated with harm from others, can have a corrosive impact on a person's

self-worth and self-confidence corrosive impact on a person's self-worth and self-confidence.

People with CPTSD often think about themselves in a persistently negative way, such as feeling worthless, hopeless, damaged or a failure wrapped up in a profound sense of personal shame.

This can lead to avoidance and suppression strategies such as alcohol and substance abuse and a compulsion to prove oneself in career environments through overworking.

Disturbances in relationships

Due to the harm they have suffered at the hands of others, people with CPTSD can understandably experience difficulties in trusting people and maintaining good relationships.

This can have a big impact on their social functioning and ability to form supportive relationships that are so important when recovering from a traumatic event.

Is CPTSD the same as borderline personality disorder (BPD)?

No, CPTSD and BPD are separate conditions, but they have features that overlap with each other.

People with BPD typically struggle with:

- feelings that can change rapidly over the course of the day
- not having a clear sense of how they feel about themselves
- acting impulsively
- getting into relationships but having a lot of fear that loved ones will abandon them
- repeated thoughts about or acts of self-harm or suicide

In contrast, people with CPTSD tend to have a clear but negative sense of how they feel about themselves and tend to avoid close relationships.

People can develop BPD after traumatic events, but some people develop BPD without any history of trauma. Some people with BPD might have features of

PTSD or CPTSD at the same time.

Establishing someone's diagnosis can be very helpful to help people understand what they are experiencing and to guide what treatments may work best for them.

It is, however, important to remember that people with PTSD and CPTSD present in different ways and the experience and appropriate management of symptoms should be personalised.

Assessment, treatment and practical advice

Please also see our Helping PTSD and CPTSD leaflet for more information on how to get help and what can be offered.



Useful websites



Traumatic Stress Wales

Traumatic Stress Wales is funded by Welsh Government and aims to improve the health and wellbeing of people of all ages living in Wales at risk of developing or with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD).

traumaticstress.nhs.wales

National Center for PTSD

Tools and information to help with a range of PTSD related symptoms and problems

ptsd.va.gov

National Institute for Healthcare Excellence (NICE)

Information on recommended treatments and downloadable leaflets.

nice.org.uk/guidance/ng116

Royal College of Psychiatrists

Information about PTSD with versions in other languages. Search PTSD from the homepage.

rcpsych.ac.uk

Veterans NHS Wales

Support for military veterans and those trying to help them.

veteranswales.co.uk

International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies

Information and resources for the public, for professionals and those involved in research.

istss.org

Notes

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Join our NCMH research community

Join our research community today and help us better understand conditions like PTSD and CPTSD. The aim of our research is to improve diagnosis, treatment, and support for people in the future.

Joining our community is easy - it involves completing an online sign-up form which takes about 15 minutes and will ask you about:

- personal information, like date of birth and ethnicity
- mental and physical health
- lifestyle

To join, visit: ncmh.info/join

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Mae'r wybodaeth hon hefyd ar gael drwy gyfrwng y Gymraeg. I ofyn am gopi, cysylltwch â ni.

info@ncmh.info

029 2068 8401

