

# PTSD

## Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) occurs following a severely traumatic incident, or a series of less severe incidents. Complex PTSD can be experienced as a result of repeated childhood traumas.

It is normal to experience stress after a trauma, but the symptoms normally diminish after several weeks. If the symptoms persist, then trauma-focused CBT or [EMDR](#) are currently recommended as the treatments of choice.

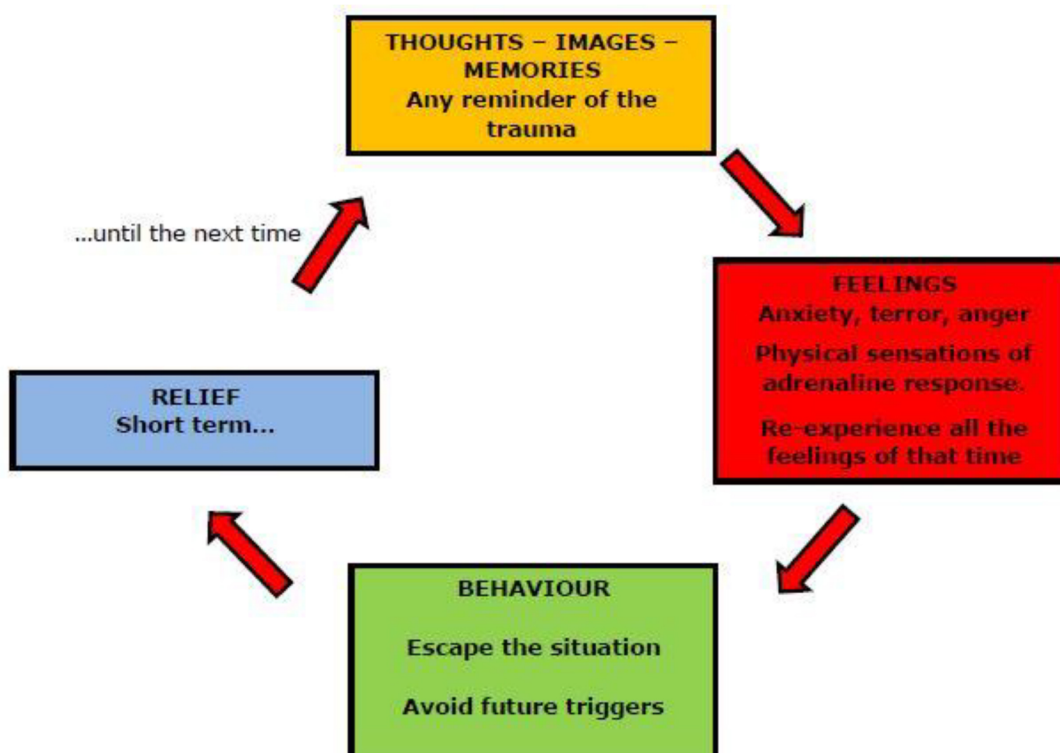
Symptoms include flashbacks (traumatic re-living of the event, including images, sounds, emotions and physical sensations) and nightmares, resulting in severe anxiety and/or angry reactions or avoidance of any triggers that may remind the individual of the incident in some way.

PTSD develops because the trauma experience was so distressing that we want to avoid any reminder of it. Our brains don't process the experience into a memory, so the experience stays as a current problem instead of becoming a memory of a past event. Each time we are reminded of the event, the 'flashbacks' mean we experience the trauma again, as though it is happening again, right now. That is very distressing, so we do our utmost to stop the flashback, and avoid any further reminder of the event, so the event remains un-processed.

Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, and [EMDR](#), helps our brain to process the traumatic event into a memory, filing it away in the appropriate filing cabinet of our mind, so that it becomes a past event, rather than constantly reliving the trauma as happening right now. Therapy will help us to think about or imagine the traumatic event in a safe environment, and we can gradually expose ourselves to those situations that remind us of the event. Inevitably, thinking and talking about the trauma may be upsetting at the time, but it will reduce the overall distress and resolve the problem.

- [Trauma & the Brain](#)
- [Trauma Metaphor](#)
- [Adrenaline – the body's alarm system](#)

### Example of a vicious cycle of PTSD



## SELF HELP FOR PTSD

### Identify the factors that help keep the PTSD going

Use the [cogs diagram](#) (PDF) to help you identify what contributes to the PTSD. You may well need professional help to overcome some factors such as Fragmented memory & Flashbacks, but you will find there are some things you can do that will help.

Example vicious cogs of PTSD:



### Overcoming Avoidance & Facing your Fears

We try to avoid all the situations, people, places and even thoughts, which are likely to distress us. This avoidance helps prevent us becoming distressed in the short-term, but it is one of the main factors which keeps the problem going over a long time. Avoidance also interferes greatly with our everyday lives.

- Use the [Avoidance worksheet](#)

### Dealing with the fragmented memory

We normally avoid thinking about the traumatic event and so our brain never processes it in the normal way. The trauma therefore never gets filed away (a completed jigsaw) as a past memory, but continues to be treated by the brain as a current threat – and we therefore experience flashbacks. The way to deal with the memory is to deliberately think about and remember the event, which allows the brain to process it and file it away as a memory. Dealing with and processing tends to be distressing, and you may well need help with this step.

- Find out as much as you can about the event, which may include asking other people involved about what they remember from their perspective, including perhaps emergency personnel.
- Try to piece the story of the event together.
- Write it down, even if only using bullet points.
- Talk about the event with other people who perhaps weren't there, but can listen and be supportive and offer a helpful perspective.

## Coping with flashbacks & nightmares

Because we become upset and avoid thinking about the trauma, the brain has not been able to process and file the memory away, so any trigger tricks the brain into thinking the event is happening again, right now, and we re-experience all the feelings and sensations as though it really was happening *right now*. Before we are helped to deal with and process the memory, we can learn strategies to help us cope with the distressing flashbacks and nightmares.

- Use these coping strategies and grounding techniques during a flashback (see below)
- Use this **Discrimination Worksheet** before a flashback, so that you can be better prepared to reassure your brain that the event is NOT happening again right now.
- Set aside some time every day, maybe 15-20 minutes, to think about the traumatic event and write down some notes. Try to make it the same time each day, which might be evening time if you have nightmares. Finish this time by writing down a positive coping statement such as "I survived", "I'm taking back control of my life", "I have ..... who/which supports me".

Tell yourself you are having a flashback or anxiety attack and that this is okay and normal.

**The worst is over** - it happened in the past, but it is not happening now.

Tell yourself: **That was then, and this is now**. However terrible you feel right now, you survived the awfulness then, which means you can survive and get through what you are remembering now.



**Open your eyes** and put a light on (if it's dark).

**Look** around the room, notice the colours, the people, the shapes of things. Make it more real.

**Listen** to and really notice the sounds around you: the traffic, voices, washing machine, music etc.

**Notice your body**, the boundary of your skin, how your clothes feel on your skin, movement in your hair as you move your head, really feel the chair or floor supporting you - how that feels in your feet, your legs, your body.

Pinch yourself - that feeling is in the now, the things you are re-experiencing happened in the past. That was then, and this is **now**.

**Stand up** and put your feet firmly on the ground

**Move about**: stretch, stamp your feet, jump up and down, dance, run on the spot, rub your arms and legs, clap your hands, walk, remind yourself where you are right now.

Use **5,4,3,2,1**: Think about 5 things you can see, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can touch (and touch them), 2 things you can smell or like the smell of, and 1 slow, deep breath.

Notice what is **right now** - and notice how different it is to the distressing memory.

**Breathe mindfully**: breathe deeply down to your belly; put your hand there (just above your navel) and breathe so that your hand gets pushed up and down. Imagine you have a balloon in your tummy, inflating it as you breathe in, and deflating as you breathe out. When we get scared, we breathe too quickly and shallowly and our body begins to panic because we're not getting enough oxygen. This causes dizziness, shakiness and more panic. Breathing slower and deeper will stop the panic.

**Rub your arms and legs**. If you have lost a sense of your body, rub your arms and legs so you can feel where your body starts and ends, the boundary of you. Wrap yourself in a blanket and feel it around you.

**Walk**, and really think about walking, or engage in any activity - mindfully. Notice the way your body moves, how your feet move and feel as you walk, notice your leg muscles, and the way your arms feel as they swing. Notice the movement in your hair, and the sensation of moving air on your skin. Notice the sensations of breathing as you walk.

**Describe** (and say out loud if appropriate) what you are doing right now, in great detail. Or describe doing a routine activity.

Try to **think about different things**, almost like playing mental games, for example: count backwards in 7s from 100, think of 10 different animals, 10 blue things, one animal or country for each letter of the alphabet, say the alphabet slowly, say the alphabet backwards etc.

Carry a **grounding object** with you. Some people carry a stone or other small object, perhaps which has personal meaning, to comfort and touch when you need to.

**Get support** if you would like it. Let people close to you know about flashbacks or how anxiety attacks affect you, so they can help if you want them to. That might mean holding you, talking to you, helping you to reconnect with the present, to remember you are safe and cared for now. If there is no-one, use a **helpline**.

**Self Care:** flashbacks and anxiety are powerful experiences which drain your energy. Take time to look after yourself afterwards. You could have a warm, relaxing bath or a sleep, a warm drink, play some soothing **music**, or just take some quiet time for yourself. Be kind to yourself.

**Ask yourself questions** in order to bring yourself into the present. Write down your own questions, for example: Where am I, right now? What day is it? What year is it? How old am I? Where do I live?

Use **Positive Coping Statements**. You might prepare a coping statement, for example: "I am (name), I am safe right now, this is just a memory - that was then and this is now. I am in (place) and the date is (date). This flashback will pass".

Make an **emergency or soothe box** you can use another time, and fill it with helpful, soothing objects or pictures. [www.get.gg/emergency.htm](http://www.get.gg/emergency.htm)

**Download an mp3** onto your phone such as First Aid for Panic, or use another from

When you feel ready, you might want to **write down** about the flashback or anxiety attack, and how you got through it. This will help to remind you that you did get through it, and can again.

Remember you are not crazy - **flashbacks are normal** and they are helping you to heal.

## Develop Coping Strategies for dealing with anxiety, stress and anger.

- **STOPP**
- **Mindful Breathing**
- **Mindfulness**
- **Relaxation techniques**
- **Anxiety Self Help**
- **Anger Self Help**
- **Stress Self Help**
- **Help for distress, right now**
- **Other Self Help resources**

**PTSD Self Help:** [www.get.gg/ptsd.htm](http://www.get.gg/ptsd.htm)

<https://arisementalhealthfoundation.com/home>