

Understanding PTSD & mental illness

How can I help?

Understanding my partner who has PTSD & mental illness. How can I help?

What is PTSD?

PTSD is a mental health disorder that can occur following the direct experience or witnessing of a life-threatening event like military combat, natural disasters, terrorist attacks, serious accidents or violent personal assaults like rape.

PTSD is often complicated by other physical & mental health problems like depression & substance misuse. Difficulties functioning at work and in family & social life are also commonly experienced.

Symptoms of PTSD

Re-experiencing - *how the trauma memory comes back to the person.*

- Bad dreams, nightmares or night terrors
- Intrusive memories of the event through images, thoughts & sensations.
- Flashbacks- Feeling as though the trauma is happening again.
- Getting emotionally upset when reminded of the trauma (often feels spontaneous).
- Physical reactions like sweating & heart racing.

Avoidance- *Ways of avoiding things related to trauma*

- Avoids trauma related thoughts & feelings
- Avoids places, people & activities which reminds them of trauma.
- Lost interest in things they used to enjoy doing. Feeling detached & cut off from others.
- Feeling emotionally numb.

Hyperarousal- *Changes in reactivity & arousal*

- Trouble falling or staying asleep. Irritability & anger.
- Difficulties concentrating or focusing on tasks.
- Feeling constantly on edge & looking for threat.

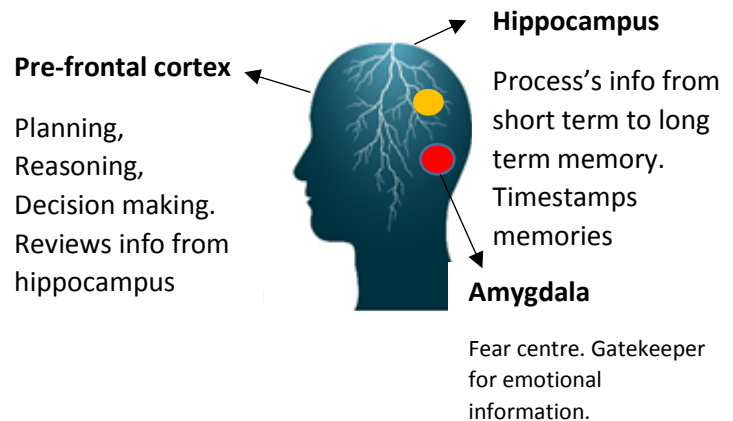
Changes in thinking & mood

- Negative beliefs about oneself, the world & others, negative emotions like guilt & shame.

Combat Stress. Session 1

Understanding how PTSD develops Trauma & the brain

There are three main parts of the brain which are affected by experiencing severe or chronic traumatic events



When we experience a life-threatening event, our amygdala reacts by activating a fight, flight or freeze response. This is supposed to be an emergency & temporary reaction, however, in PTSD, the amygdala continues to signal there is danger when danger no longer exists.

This results in high levels of stress hormones being produced which stops the hippocampus & pre-frontal cortex working. This prevents trauma memories from being processed properly. Also, childhood trauma can exaggerate this effect. The trauma memory remains fragmented, raw & has no time stamp. Thus, it is easily triggered.

Fast facts

1. Only one fifth of UK veterans with mental health difficulties are able to engage in help seeking behaviour. Partners are often instrumental to helping their loved one initially seek help they need.
2. In 2006, rates of PTSD in UK veterans following Iraq conflict was found to be 4% & anxiety & depression 20%.
3. 69 per cent of veterans suffering from PTSD also present with alcohol difficulties.

Understanding PTSD & Mental Illness

How can I help?

Combat Stress. Session 1

What is trauma focused CBT?

CBT or Cognitive Behavioural Therapy is a collaborative form of therapy. Some of the therapy may include the following components;



Grounding & stabilisation

This helps to manage overwhelming feelings PTSD brings. These may include relaxation techniques which help a person stay grounded in the here & now.



Work with trauma memories

In order to process trauma memories properly the survivor is required to approach their memories of trauma. This might involve talking about what happened, deliberately imagining the events, writing or drawing it. Work with beliefs



The mind of a survivor tries to make sense of what has happened to them. Sometimes the events are so catastrophic that people come to see the world in a negative way. Belief work involves looking at what you thought at the time of the trauma and deciding what is a fair way to think about yourself and your situation now.



Reclaiming your life

Effective therapy is about helping you to be your own therapist and taking back the things you used to enjoy or building a new life you value.

How effective is trauma focused CBT?

There is strong evidence for trauma focused CBT being an effective treatment for PTSD. Research trials have shown that it is superior to therapies which do not involve talking about their trauma experiences and it is as effective as other evidence-based therapies for PTSD such as eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR).

A partner's role in treatment

For veterans in treatment it is important to support them with being patient and helping them to take one step at a time. If your partner is not already engaged in treatment encourage them to contact Combat Stress (0800 323 4444), their local IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) service or GP who will be aware of local services. For veterans who are reluctant to participate in face to face treatment there is an online service called Big White Wall. Please refer to resources.

Why do some people develop PTSD & others not?

So how does one person develop PTSD, and another does not despite being exposed to the same events? Numerous factors determine how a person is affected by being exposed to a life-threatening event. These include, biological, psychological and social factors, for example

Biologically: Autonomic nervous system has been found to be more reactive in individuals with PTSD compared to individuals without the disorder.

Psychologically: Experiences from childhood up to joining the military, beliefs we develop through life about ourselves, others and the world, the way we think and make sense of the trauma (I'm at fault, I'm weak), unhelpful coping strategies, avoidance and controlling thoughts through keeping busy, suppressing thoughts, using alcohol or drugs.

Socially: Stigma/prejudice/lack of interest or understanding, the Armed Forces, society in general, friends/family/workplace colleagues, society's treatment of those with mental health problems, support after leaving military.

**ANYONE CAN DEVELOP
PTSD. IT IS A NORMAL
REACTION TO AN
ABNORMAL EXPERIENCE.**