

Health Spotlight: Trauma and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

In 2020, 75% of Australians reported experiencing a traumatic event at some point in their lives, where 60% of this group were experiencing some form of trauma in the 12 months prior.¹

It is estimated that 12 in every 100 Australians will experience PTSD at some time in their lives with women being almost twice as likely as men to be at risk.²

What is Trauma and PTSD?

Trauma is an emotional response to a very stressful, frightening or distressing event or series of events that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. There are different types of traumas including:

- **Acute trauma:** happens after a single incident
- **Chronic trauma:** develops from repeated and long lasting events
- **Complex trauma:** arises from exposure to multiple traumatic events³

It's normal to have feelings of fear and anxiety after a traumatic event but in some cases, these feelings can last for a long time and affect how we cope with everyday life. PTSD can develop where the trauma is prolonged. There is a greater risk of PTSD where the trauma stems from a serious accident, receiving a life-threatening diagnosis, sexual assault, ongoing physical or emotional abuse and neglect, or from acts of war that include military combat, torture and terrorism.⁴

Warning signs

Trauma can have lasting effects on mental, physical, emotional, social or spiritual wellbeing. The warning signs of trauma can vary widely but often include intrusive thoughts, flashbacks or nightmares. Individuals may avoid reminders of the trauma and show hypervigilance, become easily startled, or withdrawn. Changes in mood such as irritability, anger, or sadness are common, along with difficulty concentrating or sleeping. Physical symptoms like headaches, stomach aches, or fatigue may also be present.⁵

International studies estimate that people with PTSD are 15 times more likely to attempt suicide, four times more likely to become addicted to drugs and alcohol, three times more likely to experience depression, and three times more likely for their trauma to impact their work.⁶

Risk factors

Several factors can increase the chances of experiencing trauma or developing PTSD after a traumatic event. These may include going through intense or long-lasting trauma, having a history of previous trauma such as childhood abuse, or a family history of mental health issues like depression or anxiety. Lack of social support and substance abuse are also significant risk factors.

Some groups may be at higher risk, including people who experience homelessness, children in adoption or foster care or under youth justice supervision, refugees, those experiencing family and domestic violence, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and people in certain jobs like emergency services, armed forces and veterans.⁷

How to protect yourself

- While it's impossible to completely avoid traumatic events, there are steps you can take to protect yourself and build resilience. Importantly, there are people and resources that are available to help:
- Lean on your support network. Your friends and family can provide emotional support during difficult times. Surround yourself with people you trust and can talk to.
- Seek professional help from a medical practitioner or mental health expert who specialises in trauma and PTSD. They can help with psychological therapies, medication and advice on self-care strategies like exercise and mindfulness.⁸
- Consider your financial wellbeing and talk to your financial adviser about your current plans. If you have Total and Permanent Disability and/or Income Protection, your PTSD along with another injury or illness may make you eligible to make a claim.

You can also call Lifeline for crisis support 24/7 on **13 11 14** or call **000** if your life is in danger. A full list of organisations offering specialist trauma support and counselling services can be found here: **headtohealth.gov.au/crisis-links**.

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