

The Child Brain Injury Trust is a national charity supporting anyone affected by childhood acquired brain injury. The following information has been developed to help the reader understand more about brain injury and some of the associated issues. Every effort has been taken to ensure the information is accurate and up to date. If you require more immediate support or assistance please contact our **Helpline 0303 3032248** or email helpline@cbituk.org where we will be able to respond to your specific enquiry and/or offer support.

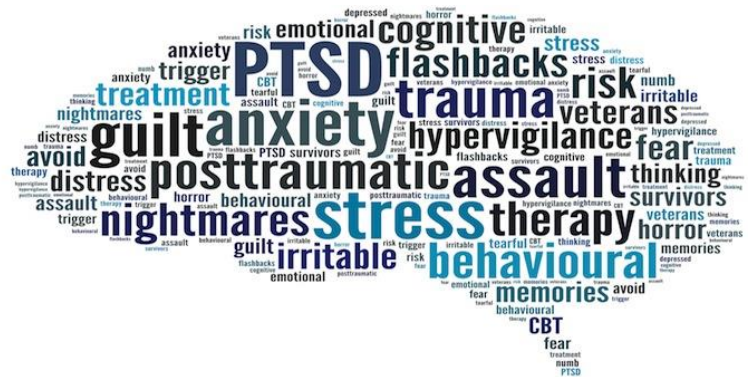
Trauma and Anxiety – Post Traumatic Stress

We mentioned in the Factsheet about **Worry, Anxiety and Stress** that sometimes if you witness something extremely frightening and dangerous, like a road accident or a serious injury, this can cause a traumatic stress reaction, which affects the way you think, feel or behave.

What are the signs of traumatic stress?

In adults:

- **Feelings become intense and sometimes are unpredictable.** You may become more irritable than usual and your mood may change back and forth dramatically. You might be especially anxious or nervous, or even become depressed.
- **Thoughts and behaviour patterns are affected by the trauma.** You might have repeated and vivid memories of the event. These flashbacks may occur for no apparent reason and may lead to physical reactions such as rapid heartbeat or sweating. You may find it difficult to concentrate or make decisions or become more easily confused. Sleep and eating patterns also may be disrupted.
- **Recurring emotional reactions are common.** Anniversaries of the event, such as at one month or one year, can trigger upsetting memories of the traumatic experience. These "triggers" may be accompanied by fears that the stressful event will be repeated.
- **Interpersonal relationships often become strained.** Greater conflict, such as more frequent arguments with family members and work colleagues, is common. On the other hand, you might become withdrawn and isolated and avoid your usual activities.
- **Physical symptoms may accompany the extreme stress.** For example, headaches, nausea and chest pain may result and may require medical attention. Pre-existing medical conditions may worsen due to the stress.



In children:

Immediately after a traumatic event, children may find it hard to sleep and have bad dreams and nightmares. Sometimes the effects may not appear for days or weeks. Other signs include:

- Becoming fearful, clingy and anxious about being separated from their parents
- Starting to bed-wet or thumb-suck again
- Becoming preoccupied with thoughts and memories of the event
- Being unable to concentrate
- Being irritable and disobedient
- Complaining of physical symptoms such as headaches and tummy-aches



All these are normal reactions to a frightening event. With help and support from the people close to them, children begin to get over the shock in a few days and usually recover after a few weeks.

Longer lasting effects

Sometimes you and/or your child may have feelings of depression and anxiety that go on for several weeks and may get worse. If they go on for a long period of time it may be that you and/or your child need some help to feel better.

Typical signs of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- *Flashbacks* of the event. For a few moments it seems as though you are re-living the experience in your mind, like watching an action-replay, which can be distressing and frightening.
- Deliberately *avoiding* thoughts or feeling about it. If you've been in a car crash, you may avoid roads or driving or sitting in a car because they remind you of the accident.
- *Sleeping badly*
- Being *easily startled* and jumping out of your skin at the slightest noise.

These reactions can go on for months and can interfere significantly with everyday life.

What can help?

For adults:

- **Give yourself time to adjust.** Anticipate that this will be a difficult time in your life. Allow yourself to mourn the losses you have experienced. Try to be patient with changes in your emotional state.
- **Ask for support from people who care about you and who will listen and empathise with your situation.** But keep in mind that your usual support system may be affected if those who are close to you also have experienced or witnessed the trauma.
- **Communicate your experience.** In whatever ways feel comfortable to you — such as talking with family or close friends, or keeping a diary.
- **Engage in healthy behaviours to enhance your ability to cope with excessive stress.** Eat well-balanced meals and get plenty of rest. If you experience ongoing difficulties with sleep, you may be able to find some relief through relaxation techniques. Avoid alcohol and drugs.

- **Establish or re-establish routines.** Such as eating meals at regular times and following an exercise program. Take some time off from the demands of daily life by pursuing hobbies or other enjoyable activities.

For children:



The best approach is to accept that a child is very likely to be distressed and that this is normal.

- At this stage it can be helpful to let your child talk about the event, or helping them to relive it through drawings or games. Talking can help children adjust. It helps them to make sense of what has happened, to feel less alone with their worries and regain a sense of control. Do not force the issue though. Your child will talk if they want to.
- If you too have been involved in the traumatic event, it is usually best to admit to your children that you are feeling sad and upset. Make it clear that you don't expect them to look after your feelings.

When to ask for professional help?

- If the feelings and behaviour seem to be getting worse.
- The signs of extreme stress last for longer than about a month.
- Worries prevent you, your child or your family getting on with normal everyday life.
- You or your child has symptoms of PTSD that go on for longer than a month.

Where to get help?

Consult your GP if you are concerned about feelings and behaviour that you or your child are experiencing. If problems continue, the doctor may suggest extra help from the local child and adolescent mental health service / local adult mental health service.

Some useful addresses for further information

Royal College of Psychiatrists: www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mentalhealthinfo

Mind: www.mind.org.uk

NHS Website: www.nhs.uk

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