

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

What Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?



Description

Many of us will experience trauma at some point in our lives. With time, most people recover from their experiences without needing professional help. However, for a significant proportion of people the effects of trauma last for much longer, and they develop a condition called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It is thought that between 3 and 5 people out of every 100 will experience PTSD every year. Fortunately, there are a range of excellent psychological therapies for PTSD.

The *What Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?* information handout is designed to help clients with PTSD understand more about their condition. It includes:

- A summary of the most common symptoms of PTSD.
- Descriptions of what it can feel like to have PTSD.
- A description of why PTSD might not get better by itself, derived from the Ehlers & Clark (2000) cognitive model of PTSD.
- A brief overview of evidence-based psychological treatments for PTSD.

Instructions

Our 'What Is ...?' series is designed to support your clients:

- **Reassure and encourage optimism.** Many clients find it hugely reassuring to know there is a name for what they are experiencing, and that there are evidence-based psychological models and treatments specifically designed to help.
- **Scaffold knowledge.** The handouts are perfect during early stages of therapy to help your clients understand how their symptoms fit together and make sense.
- **Signposting.** If you're just seeing a client briefly for assessment, or you have a curious client who wants to know more, these resources can be a helpful part of guiding them to the right service.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (DSM-5®). *American Psychiatric Pub.*

Courtois, C. A., Sonis, J., Brown, L. S., Cook, J., Fairbank, J. A., Friedman, M., & Schulz, P. (2017). Clinical practice guideline for the treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in adults. *American Psychological Association.*

Ehlers, A., & Clark, D. M. (2000). A cognitive model of posttraumatic stress disorder. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 38(4), 319-345.

Kessler, R. C., Chiu, W. T., Demler, O., & Walters, E. E. (2005). Prevalence, severity, and co-morbidity of 12-month DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 62(6), 617-627.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (2018). *Post-traumatic stress disorder*. Retrieved from: <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng116/resources/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-pdf-66141601777861>

World Health Organization. (2019). *ICD-11: International classification of diseases* (11th revision). Retrieved from <https://icd.who.int/>

What Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

You feel on-edge, unable to relax, and on the lookout for danger.

You feel strong emotions (e.g. fearful, anxious, mad, ashamed, or guilty) or feel numb.

You think very negatively about what happened and what it means (e.g. believing that you're still in danger, blaming yourself).

You re-experience powerful memories of what happened to you.

You cope by avoiding reminders of what happened (e.g. avoiding people, places, your own thoughts; keeping busy).

Many of us will experience trauma at some point in our lives, and it's normal to be affected by what has happened to you. If you have been through a trauma, you might feel shocked, scared, guilty, ashamed, mad, vulnerable, or numb.

With time, most people recover from their experiences without needing professional help. However, for some people the effects of trauma last for much longer, and they develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It's thought that between 3 and 5 people out of every 100 will develop PTSD every year.

The core of PTSD: a sense of threat

When something dangerous happens, it's normal (and helpful) to feel a sense of threat – this focuses your attention on trying to get safe. The puzzle of PTSD is that people continue to feel like they are under threat, even after the danger has passed. This can be very intense and frightening.

I have flashbacks where it feels like the trauma is happening again.



I keep feeling like I'm going to see the person who attacked me.



I can't sleep more than an hour or two.



Your sense of threat in PTSD can get stuck for a few reasons:

Unprocessed memories

Psychologists think your brain processes and stores memories of traumatic events differently from normal memories. The result is that memories of your trauma might:

- 'Pop' unwanted into your mind.
- Be vivid and emotionally powerful.
- Make you think and feel that the trauma is happening again right now, and that you are in danger.

Unhelpful thinking

The way you think about what happened to you can keep your sense of threat going. Common examples of unhelpful thinking include:

- Blaming yourself for things that weren't your fault.
- Being tricked into thinking that you are in danger by flashbacks and nightmares.
- Assuming incorrectly that something terrible is likely to happen again.

Safety behaviors

It's natural to try to avoid situations that make you feel afraid, ashamed, or which trigger unwanted memories.

Unfortunately, avoidance and 'safety strategies' mean that your memories remain unprocessed, and you don't have the chance to find out whether your beliefs are true.

Treatment for PTSD

Many different psychological treatments have been proven to help get you unstuck from PTSD. These include: cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), cognitive processing (CPT), prolonged exposure (PE), and narrative exposure therapy (NET).

Although the mechanics of these therapies all differ slightly, they all share some common features: talking about what happened to you, examining how you made sense of what happened to you, reducing avoidance, and helping you to reclaim your life.

Psychology Tools develops and publishes evidence-based psychotherapy resources. We support mental health professionals to deliver effective therapy, whatever their theoretical orientation or level of experience.

Our digital library encompasses information handouts, worksheets, workbooks, exercises, guides, and audio skills-development resources.

Our tools are flexible enough to be used both in-session and between-session, and during all stages of assessment, formulation, and intervention. Written by highly qualified clinicians and academics, materials are available in digital and printable formats across a wide range of languages.



Resource details

Title: What Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

Type: Information Handout

Language: English (US)

Translated title: What Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

URL: <https://www.psychologytools.com/resource/what-is-post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd>

Resource format: Professional

Version: 20230721

Last updated by: JP

Terms & conditions

This resource may be used by licensed members of Psychology Tools and their clients. Resources must be used in accordance with our terms and conditions which can be found at: <https://www.psychologytools.com/terms-and-conditions/>

Disclaimer

Your use of this resource is not intended to be, and should not be relied on, as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment. If you are suffering from any mental health issues we recommend that you seek formal medical advice before using these resources. We make no warranties that this information is correct, complete, reliable or suitable for any purpose. As a professional user, you should work within the bounds of your own competencies, using your own skill and knowledge, and therefore the resources should be used to support good practice, not to replace it.

Copyright

Unless otherwise stated, this resource is Copyright © 2023 Psychology Tools Limited. All rights reserved.