

mind hk



Understanding post-traumatic stress disorder

認識創傷後壓力症 (創傷後 遺症／創傷後應激障礙)

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This booklet is for anyone who experiences post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It explains what PTSD is and the different types of treatment available. It also suggests ways you can help yourself, and what friends and family can do to help.

本小冊子是為經歷創傷後壓力症的患者而著。內容包括解釋何為創傷後壓力症及其不同的治療方法。亦有提供患者，患者家人、朋友的自助方法。

Contents

目錄

What is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)? 何謂創傷後壓力症?	4
What causes PTSD? 創傷後壓力症的其他名稱	6
How can I help myself? 我可以如何幫助自己?	8
What treatments are available? 有甚麼治療方法?	11
How can friends and family help? 自助資源	13
Useful contacts 常用聯繫人	16

What is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

何謂創傷後壓力症？

If you are involved in or witness a traumatic event, it is common to experience upsetting, distressing or confusing feelings afterwards. The feelings of distress may not emerge straight away – you may just feel emotionally numb at first. After a while you may develop emotional and physical reactions, such as feeling easily upset or not being able to sleep

This is understandable, and many people find that these symptoms disappear in a relatively short period of time. But if your problems last for longer than a month, or are very extreme, you may be given a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

There's no time limit on distress, and some people may not develop post-traumatic symptoms until many years after the event. Additionally, not everyone who has experienced a traumatic event develops PTSD.

Other terms for PTSD

創傷後壓力症的其他名稱

The diagnosis 'PTSD' was first used by veterans of the Vietnam War, but the problem has existed for a lot longer and has had a variety of names, including:

- shell shock
- soldier's heart
- battle fatigue
- combat stress
- post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSS)

Today, the term PTSD can be used to describe the psychological problems resulting from any traumatic event

What are the symptoms?

創傷後壓力症的徵狀

The symptoms of PTSD can vary from person to person, although you may experience some of the following.

Reliving aspects of the trauma:

- vivid flashbacks (feeling that the trauma is happening all over again)
- intrusive thoughts and images
- nightmares
- intense distress at real or symbolic reminders of the trauma
- physical sensations, such as pain, sweating, nausea or trembling.

"I feel like I'm straddling a timeline where the past is pulling me in one direction and the present another. I see flashes of images and noises burst through, fear comes out of nowhere... my heart races and my breathing is loud and I no longer know where I am."

Alertness or feeling on edge:

- panicking when reminded of the trauma
- being easily upset or angry
- extreme alertness
- a lack of or disturbed sleep
- irritability and aggressive behaviour
- lack of concentration
- being easily startled
- self-destructive behaviour or recklessness.

"I'm always left shaking violently afterwards and drenched in sweat. I feel so ashamed of myself, yet I'm still too scared to look up for fear of what's there."

Avoiding feelings or memories:

- keeping busy

- avoiding situations that remind you of the trauma
- repressing memories (being unable to remember aspects of the event)
- feeling detached, cut off and emotionally numb
- being unable to express affection
- using alcohol or drugs to avoid memories.

“I started experiencing symptoms of PTSD after my boyfriend died. I suffered extremely vivid flashbacks that could happen at any time, anywhere, and were deeply distressing... I threw myself into another relationship very quickly to try and avoid how I was feeling, but then also would not express much affection to my new partner.”

You may also develop other mental health problems, such as:

- severe anxiety
- a phobia
- depression
- a dissociative disorder
- suicidal feelings.

“I was also deeply depressed and experiencing huge amounts of anxiety, refusing to go anywhere alone or go near any men that I didn't know... [I] would lock my bedroom windows and barricade my bedroom door at night.”

(See Mind's booklets Understanding anxiety and panic attacks, Understanding phobias, Understanding depression, Understanding dissociative disorders and How to cope with suicidal feelings for more information on these problems.)

What causes PTSD?

創傷後壓力症的其他名稱

The situations we find traumatic can vary from person to person and different events can lead to PTSD. It may be that your responses have been bottled up for a long time after the traumatic event has passed. Your problems may only emerge months or sometimes years after a traumatic experience, affecting your ability to lead your life as you'd like to.

A traumatic event could include:

- a serious accident, for example a car crash
- an event where you fear for your life
- being physically assaulted
- being raped or sexually assaulted
- abuse in childhood
- a traumatic childbirth, either as a mother or a partner witnessing a traumatic birth
- extreme violence or war
- military combat
- seeing people hurt or killed
- a natural disaster, such as flooding or an earthquake
- losing someone close to you in disturbing circumstances.

"I was mugged and then about a year later I was on the Tube when the police were trying to arrest someone who had a gun. In neither experience was I physically injured – although in the second one I thought I was going to die and that I was going to see lots of other people die."

The following factors may also make you more vulnerable to developing PTSD after experiencing a traumatic event, or might make the problems you experience more severe:

- experiencing repeated trauma
- getting physically hurt or feeling pain
- having little or no support from friends, family or professionals

- dealing with extra stress at the same time, such as bereavement or loss
- previously experiencing anxiety or depression.

Anyone can experience a traumatic event, but you may be more likely to have experienced one if you:

- work in a high risk occupation, such as the police or military
- are a refugee or asylum seeker
- have suffered childhood abuse.

Different types of trauma can have different types of impact. If you experienced trauma at an early age or if the trauma went on for a long time then you may be diagnosed with 'complex PTSD'. Treating 'complex PTSD' usually requires more long-term, intensive help than supporting you to recover from a one-off traumatic event.

"I was [...] having uncontrollable flashbacks, regularly felt suicidal. I was emotionally numb, kept people distant and was prone to drastic loss of self control and anger."

How can I help myself?

我可以如何幫助自己？

"I worried that I would never be able to go back to the job I loved. I worried that I would be stuck like this forever. Had I not been through it, I think I would find it hard to believe how real the whole thing was at the time. Having got through it, it has made me more hopeful about my ability to get through anything difficult – I got through PTSD, so I can get through anything!"

After a traumatic event you may feel numb, dazed and disorientated. Many people find it hard to accept what has happened to them and you may behave as though nothing bad has happened. This response may

allow you time away from the trauma and you may subconsciously be beginning to process what you've been through. When you feel ready, you may find the following ideas helpful.

Talk to someone close to you 跟相熟的人談天

Talking about your feelings, when you feel ready, may be a good way of coming to terms with the experience. You may turn to friends, relatives and colleagues, or seek professional help when you decide you do want to talk about what you've been through.

"The things that helped me while I was going through the worst of it [...] I took up running (which helped me sleep, as it seemed to 'clear' the excess adrenaline); talking to lots of my friends and my sisters, again and again; giving up sugar and alcohol (I was using them as masks for my erratic behaviour)."

Talk to people with similar experiences 跟有經驗的人交流

It may be very helpful for you to share your experiences with others who have been through something similar. This can be an extremely important step in moving away from isolation and towards regaining control of your life.

Give yourself time 給自己時間

Everyone will have their own unique responses, and will need to proceed at their own pace. Talking before you want to might not be helpful. It may make you relive memories of the event, increasing the risk of flashbacks or nightmares. Allow yourself to feel ready to talk about your experiences.

Mindfulness 靜觀

Mindfulness is a technique for becoming more aware of the present

moment. It can help us enjoy the world around us more, and understand ourselves better. Some of the ways you could practise mindfulness are through meditation, tai chi or yoga. Some people find this helps them manage anxiety and stress. Be Mindful has more information (see 'Useful contacts' on p.16).

"Mindfulness I think has changed my life – it has given me amazing tools for managing difficult times, especially anxiety, and I feel much more resilient as a result."

Contact an organisation for support

聯絡機構支援

You may find it useful to contact an organisation that specialises in PTSD, such as ASSIST trauma care. They will be able to give you advice, information and support. You may find it particularly useful to find a specialist organisation with expertise in the particular type of trauma you have experienced

Visit your GP

諮詢你的家庭醫生

If you want to, you can ask your GP for help and discuss the support options with them (see 'What treatments are available?' below for more information). Before prescribing treatment for PTSD, your GP or mental health specialist will do an assessment so that they can match the treatment to your specific needs.

Doctors and therapists should be aware of your cultural and ethnic background. If you need an interpreter, they should arrange this for you. They should also assess the impact of the traumatic event on all your close family and provide appropriate support (see 'How can friends and family help?' on p.14).

What treatments are available?

有甚麼治療方法?

“At times I felt that nothing was going to end the distress I was feeling, experiencing more than 10 flashbacks a day of the abuse I suffered as a child. It was a long process of recovery, with lots of bumps along the road, but the right medication and long-term therapy with someone I came to trust, has changed my life”

If you have mild symptoms of PTSD or you have had symptoms for less than four weeks, your GP may recommend watchful waiting. This means monitoring your symptoms yourself to see if they get worse or if they improve. If this is the course of action your GP recommends and you feel comfortable with it, you should have a follow-up appointment within one month.

Your GP may be able to refer you to a local practitioner who has been trained in treating PTSD, such as a psychotherapist. Getting professional help can take time – waiting lists for talking treatments in particular can be long. You may want to consider seeing a therapist privately – but be aware that private therapists usually charge for appointments. There are different treatments available for PTSD and it is important you are able to find the right treatment approach for you.

Trauma-focused cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT)

認知行為治療

CBT is a talking treatment based on changing the way we view things, such as trying to change negative ways of thinking into more positive ones. If you have been through a traumatic experience, you may expect that you will go on experiencing the negative feelings associated with it. You may also expect that certain triggers will always bring up old unwanted feelings.

Trauma-focused CBT helps you to recognise these expectations, and try to find a more useful way of reacting and behaving. It may help you to restart activities you have been avoiding, for example travelling on public transport, and can help you to cope with other symptoms. Therapists delivering this treatment need to have special training to practise (see Mind’s booklet Making sense of talking treatments for more information about CBT).

Eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR)

眼動減敏及重組

In this treatment, developed in the late 1980s, you make rhythmic eye movements while recalling the traumatic event. The eye movements are designed to stimulate the information-processing system in the brain. The aim of the treatment is to help you process the traumatic events, and speed up readjustment and recovery. (See Mind’s booklet Making sense of talking treatments for more information.)

“EMDR made a huge difference to me (I was quite sceptical about it most of the way through, but it seemed in the end to work some sort of magic!)”

Medication

藥物治療

Medication is not normally offered as routine first-line treatment for PTSD. However, you may be prescribed antidepressants as part of your treatment if:

- you are clinically depressed
- you are having difficulty sleeping
- you do not want to receive a talking treatment or don’t feel ready to talk.

Antidepressants such as Mirtazapine, amitriptyline and phenelzine have also been found to be effective and are sometimes recommended as well. However, amitriptyline and phenelzine should only be used under the

supervision of a mental health specialist.

Since antidepressants can be difficult to come off they should be used with caution and with full knowledge of their possible side effects. (See Mind's booklet Making sense of antidepressants for more information.)

Other treatment options

其他治療方法

There are other kinds of treatment options available which you may be offered or choose to explore, for example:

- Group therapy – You may be given the option to receive treatment in a group setting. You may be asked to talk about your experience of trauma and the emotions you feel with other people who also have PTSD. The aim of these sessions is to help you understand your experience of PTSD and learn ways to manage your symptoms.
- Psychodynamic therapy – Psychodynamic therapy is based on the idea that the past has an impact on your experiences and feelings in the present. The therapy focuses on the emotions you have experienced in response to a traumatic event. It aims to help you learn ways to manage intense emotions.

Experts are still evaluating evidence for which kinds of talking treatments can be effective for PTSD, and you may want to discuss this with your GP or therapist before pursuing these options. (See Mind's booklet Making sense of talking treatments for more information.)

How can friends and family help?

親友如何協助創傷後壓力症的患者？

This section is for friends or family who wish to support someone who has

PTSD. If you are a work colleague of someone who has PTSD, this section may also be useful for you.

Listen

聆聽

Social support is really important in helping someone with PTSD seek help and recover.

You can help by:

- listening to their experience, if they want to tell you about it
- giving them time to talk and tell their story
- allowing them to be upset
- not judging them.

Look out for warning signs

留意危險警告

You might see a change in the behaviour or mood of the person you want to support. Some of these changes might include:

- a change in performance at work, lateness or taking sick leave
- a change in mood, such as anger, irritability or depression
- a change in energy levels, such as alertness or a lack of concentration.

If you notice a change in the behaviour of someone close to you, you could ask them how they feel. If they are going through a difficult time, this might encourage them to seek help.

Help them seek support

幫助他們尋求支援

If they want you to, you could help your friend or family member seek support. This could start with you exploring sources of support together (see 'Useful contacts' on pp.16–17 for information about organisations who can offer advice and support).

Learn about PTSD

了解創傷後壓力症

You may find it helpful to find out more about PTSD, especially if you know someone close to you has experienced a traumatic event. This will help you to support the person and better understand what they might be going through. Anxiety UK has information about PTSD which you may find helpful (see 'Useful contacts' on p.16).

Look after yourself

照顧自己

A traumatic event can have a major impact, not just on those who lived through it, but also on that person's family, friends and colleagues. There are sources of support available for you too. Lifecentre provides help for people supporting survivors of sexual abuse. ASSIST trauma care also provides support for families, friends and carers of people with PTSD (see 'Useful contacts' on p.16.)

Useful Contacts

有用的聯絡

The Mental Health Association of
Hong Kong

香港心理衛生會

tel: 2528 0196

web: www.mhahk.org.hk

Amity Mutual Support Society

恆康互助社

tel: 2332 2759

web: www.amss1996.org.hk

HK FamilyLink Mental Health
Advocacy Association

香港家連家精神健康倡導協會

tel: 2144 7244

web: www.familylink.org.hk

United Centre of Emotional Health &
Positive Living

聯合情緒健康教育中心

tel: 2349 3212

web: www.ucep.org.hk

The Samaritan Befrienders Hong
Kong

港撒瑪利亞防止自殺會

tel: 2389 2222

web: www.sbhk.org.hk

Institute of Mental Health Castle Peak
Hospital

青山醫院精神健康學院

tel: 2466 7350

web: www3.ha.org.hk

Further Information

Mind HK was founded and is jointly supported by Mind UK and the Patient Care Foundation. At the moment Mind HK is limited to website support but with donations we hope to expand the work that is done. Volunteers welcome to contact: mentalhealth@patientcarefoundation.com.hk

Mind Hong Kong 是由 Mind UK 及 Patient Care Foundation Hong Kong 聯合協辦的機構。在現階段我們只能提供有限度的網上支援。假若有足夠的捐款，我們會進一步擴大服務範圍。如有興趣參與義工團隊，請聯絡: mentalhealth@patientcarefoundation.com.hk