

# Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

## A short guide to providing initial support



This guide has been produced by the Methodist Forces Board for those who may have pastoral concerns for others. It may also assist those who observe changes in someone they know, where the changes may be connected to past trauma.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can manifest itself in individuals at times that are remote from the circumstances that caused the condition in the first place. It is possible that in a church context you may experience someone whose PTSD has been 'triggered' and who is responding in a way that is hard, even for the individual themselves, to understand.

This guide will help with:

- recognising the signs that someone may be experiencing PTSD
- providing initial support until specialist help can be found
- signposting someone to additional sources of support.

**Appropriate help should be sought for someone who is suffering PTSD.**

**Sources of further support, including help and information lines, are listed at the end of this guide.**

### 1. What is post-traumatic stress disorder?

Traumatic events can make people feel frightened, sad, isolated, or changed in a way that they don't understand. These are natural responses. For some people, however, abnormal events that seriously threaten their safety or the safety of someone they are close to, are not correctly processed by the brain as being in the past. This can lead to PTSD.

PTSD occurs because some deeply upsetting events impress themselves so strongly into an individual's awareness (literally re-wiring their brain) that the awful memories keep returning in various forms. These could be flashbacks, overwhelming emotions and/or physical symptoms.

### 2. Who does it affect?

Some groups of people are more likely to experience trauma, such as those in the armed forces or emergency services. However, trauma can happen to anyone.

Events that can leave someone feeling broken and may lead to PTSD include:

- a serious accident
- a terrorist attack
- military combat
- rape, kidnap or physical assault
- sexual, physical or emotional abuse
- severe neglect, especially during childhood
- an unexpected death, or injury to a loved one
- natural disasters, like floods, fires, earthquakes
- witnessing a serious injury or fatality.

Many of these types of trauma will give rise to safeguarding considerations. When dealing with someone with experience of trauma linked to questions of safeguarding, you are strongly encouraged to seek advice from your District Safeguarding Officer.

### 3. What are the signs and symptoms of PTSD?

- Irritability or anger
- Flashbacks
- Poor sleep or nightmares
- Feelings of guilt
- Stress, anxiety or panic attacks
- Poor concentration or poor memory
- Distress, depression or emotional numbness
- Withdrawal and isolation
- Hyper-alertness

- Thinking something bad is about to happen
- Not wanting to talk about what happened
- Using drugs or alcohol to cope with feelings

Each person's experience of PTSD will be unique to them. These signs and symptoms can occur on their own or in combination with others. It is possible that a person who has these symptoms is scared or ashamed of them and will try hard to hide them. They may become distressed without warning, or by a seemingly unlinked or insignificant event. It is not always immediately obvious that the signs and symptoms of PTSD are connected to an experience of trauma.

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## 4. What to do if you think someone may be suffering from PTSD

- If they start to open up, listen to them without judgement
- Encourage them to seek support
- Share details of the organisations listed at the end of this guide
- Offer to put them in touch with someone from the pastoral team
- If you are concerned for their immediate welfare, dial 999 and ask for an ambulance
- Consider whether the context requires a conversation with the District Safeguarding Officer
- Consider talking the situation through with a church leader

## Friends and family

It is possible that trusted friends or family are offering significant levels of support. Be mindful that they may also have support needs. It might be that they are the ones reaching out to the church for help.

Family and close friends may also be shut out by the individual experiencing PTSD – perhaps because the individual does not want to be a burden to them. This is likely to be having a significant impact on relationships for all involved.

## 5. Support

Each person's experience of PTSD will be unique to them. For someone suffering PTSD it can seem as though they will never get over what happened. However, with proper treatment and the right support, a person with PTSD can start the path to recovery. Recovery may require support over a long time, but many people find that they grow through the experience.

**Support is available from:**

### The GP

A GP will be able to provide referrals to local services that can assist with the journey to recovery.

### Charities

- **PTSD UK** [www.ptsduk.org](http://www.ptsduk.org)
- **PTSD Resolution** (charity for UK Forces veterans) [www.ptsdresolution.org](http://www.ptsdresolution.org) Free helpline: 0300 302 0551 (*office hours*)
- **Combat Stress** (UK veterans' mental health charity) A range of resources, including self-help modules, is available from the website [www.combatstress.org.uk](http://www.combatstress.org.uk) Free 24-hour helpline: 0800 138 1619
- **CALM** – Campaign Against Living Miserably (provides men with a listening ear and support, and raises awareness of the high risk of suicide among men, especially young men) [www.thecalmzone.net](http://www.thecalmzone.net) Helpline: 0800 585 858 (*every day 5pm – midnight*) Webchat: [www.thecalmzone.net/help/webchat](http://www.thecalmzone.net/help/webchat)
- **Mind** (mental health charity) [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk) Infoline: 0300 123 3393
- **Samaritans** Free 24-hour helpline: 116 123 or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)
- **Together All** – formerly Big White Wall (a safe, anonymous online community for people who are anxious, depressed or suffering from PTSD) [www.togetherall.com](http://www.togetherall.com) (*available 24/7*)

## A prayer for those affected by PTSD

God our creator, saviour and companion, who understands the pain and anguish that life sometimes brings.

### We pray:

for those for whom the ordinary everyday things trigger traumatic memories;  
for those who silently bear the anxieties and fears – known and unknown – around them;  
for those who feel like they have lost control of the things of life most precious to them.

### We pray:

for family and friends who support, and who care with kindness, and who sometimes watch helplessly on;  
for the work of counsellors, volunteers and charities who come alongside and accompany on the journey.  
Enable lives to flourish, and direct all people to places of hope, courage, strength and peace.

**Amen.**

Methodist Forces chaplains have helped to produce this guide, drawing on their experience of dealing with individuals with PTSD – both with trauma connected to time in the armed forces and, oftentimes, from other sources.

Our thanks to the Armed Forces Christian Union for much of the text contained here.

A digital version of this short guide is available from [www.methodistchurch.org.uk](http://www.methodistchurch.org.uk) (search 'PTSD').