



# Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

## What Is Trauma?

Trauma is an emotional, psychological, and physical response to an event or series of events that are overwhelming, frightening, or distressing. Traumatic experiences can make a person feel helpless, unsafe, or unable to cope. While many people recover naturally over time, others may continue to experience lasting effects that interfere with their daily lives.

Trauma can result from experiencing, witnessing, or learning about events that involve actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence. Examples include:

- Physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.
- Domestic or intimate partner violence.
- War, armed conflict, or displacement.
- Natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, or droughts.
- Serious accidents or injuries.
- Sudden loss of a loved one.
- Medical emergencies or life-threatening illnesses.
- Community violence or witnessing traumatic events.

It is important to remember that people respond to trauma differently. An event that is traumatic for one person may not have the same impact on another. Factors such as previous experiences, available support, coping skills, and personal resilience all influence how someone responds to trauma.

## Common Reactions to Trauma

Following a traumatic event, it is normal to experience a range of emotional, physical, cognitive, and behavioural reactions. These reactions are often part of the body's natural response to overwhelming stress and usually improve over time.

Common reactions include:

- Feeling fearful, anxious, shocked, numb, or emotionally overwhelmed.
- Sadness, grief, anger, guilt, or shame.
- Difficulty sleeping, nightmares, or disturbing dreams.
- Intrusive memories or unwanted thoughts about the event.
- Difficulty concentrating or remembering things.
- Feeling constantly alert or easily startled.
- Avoiding reminders of the traumatic event.
- Withdrawal from family, friends, or usual activities.
- Physical symptoms such as headaches, muscle tension, fatigue, rapid heartbeat, or stomach problems.

Most people gradually recover as they process the experience and receive support from family, friends, or professionals.



## What Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that can develop after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event. While many people recover from trauma naturally, some continue to experience persistent symptoms that interfere with daily life, relationships, work, or school.

PTSD is not a sign of weakness. It is a recognised mental health condition that can affect anyone, regardless of age, gender, or background.

Symptoms of PTSD generally fall into four main categories:

- **Re-experiencing symptoms:** unwanted memories, flashbacks, nightmares, or feeling as though the traumatic event is happening again.
- **Avoidance symptoms:** avoiding people, places, conversations, thoughts, or activities that remind the person of the trauma.
- **Changes in thoughts and mood:** persistent negative beliefs about oneself or others, feelings of guilt or shame, loss of interest in activities, emotional numbness, difficulty experiencing positive emotions, or feeling detached from others.
- **Changes in arousal and reactivity:** being easily startled, constantly on guard (hypervigilance), irritability, anger, difficulty sleeping, difficulty concentrating, or engaging in reckless behaviour.

For a diagnosis of PTSD, symptoms typically last for **more than one month**, cause significant distress, and interfere with important areas of daily functioning.

## Causes and Risk Factors

Not everyone who experiences trauma develops PTSD. The likelihood depends on several factors, including the nature of the traumatic event and the individual's circumstances.

Factors that may increase the risk include:

- Experiencing severe or repeated trauma.
- Childhood abuse or neglect.
- Previous traumatic experiences.
- Lack of social or family support after the event.
- Existing mental health conditions such as anxiety or depression.
- Ongoing life stress or additional traumatic events.
- Family history of mental health difficulties.

Protective factors include strong social support, healthy coping skills, access to professional care, and a safe environment.

## How Are Trauma and PTSD Treated?

Trauma and PTSD are treatable. Many people recover with appropriate support and evidence-based treatment.



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**Psychoeducation and Self-care:** Learning about trauma and its effects helps people understand that many reactions are normal responses to abnormal events. Maintaining regular routines, getting enough sleep, exercising, eating a balanced diet, practising relaxation techniques, and connecting with supportive family and friends can promote recovery.

**Counselling (Psychotherapy):** Trauma-focused therapy is one of the most effective treatments for PTSD. A trained mental health professional helps individuals process traumatic experiences, reduce distress, and develop healthy coping strategies. Common evidence-based approaches include Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (TF-CBT), Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT), Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR), and Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE).

**Medication:** Some people may benefit from medication, particularly if symptoms are severe or occur alongside depression or anxiety. Antidepressant medications may help reduce PTSD symptoms and improve mood, sleep, and daily functioning. Medication should always be prescribed and monitored by a qualified healthcare provider.

**Stress Management and Relaxation Techniques:** Deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, mindfulness, grounding exercises, and other relaxation strategies can help reduce anxiety, manage distress, and improve emotional regulation.

**Social Support:** Support from trusted family members, friends, community groups, or peer support programmes can play a vital role in recovery. Feeling understood and connected often helps people regain a sense of safety and hope.

## When to Seek Professional Help

Professional support should be sought if trauma reactions:

- Last longer than one month.
- Become more severe instead of improving.
- Interfere with work, school, relationships, or daily activities.
- Lead to increased use of alcohol or drugs.
- Include thoughts of self-harm or suicide.
- Cause overwhelming distress that feels difficult to manage alone.

Early support can prevent symptoms from becoming more severe and improve recovery outcomes.

## Recovery from Trauma

Recovery is possible. Healing does not mean forgetting what happened; rather, it means learning to cope with the experience in a way that no longer controls your life. With the right support, treatment, and time, many people regain a sense of safety, hope, and well-being and return to meaningful daily activities.

## References



## Prime Som Counselling Services

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