

Understanding PTSD and CPTSD
Information for individuals, partners and families

NCMH
National Centre for Mental Health
Canolfan Iechyd Meddwl Genedlaethol



**Straen
Trawmatig
Cymru**

**Traumatic
Stress
Wales**

Understanding PTSD and CPTSD



**Ymchwil Iechyd
a Gofal Cymru**
Health and Care
Research Wales



**Ariennir gan
Lywodraeth Cymru**
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What is PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the name given to a mental health condition that some people develop after they have experienced a major traumatic event. PTSD is a common mental health condition, with studies estimating that 7% of people will develop PTSD at some point in their lifetime; up to one third of people who have experienced a traumatic event go on to develop PTSD.

What is a traumatic event?

A traumatic event could be when a person experiences or witnesses a single incident that threatens or causes death, serious injury or sexual violence, or many incidents that have happened over weeks, months or years.

Examples of traumatic events include:

- childhood abuse, including emotional neglect
- childbirth experiences
- civil war, unrest, or torture
- domestic violence
- first responder or military events
- life threatening illness or injury
- natural and man-made disasters
- physical assault
- road traffic accidents
- sexual assault
- terrorist attacks
- or any catastrophic situation.

Main features of PTSD

People with PTSD can experience three different types of symptoms; re-experiencing the trauma, avoidance of thoughts, memories and reminders of the trauma, and a persistent feeling of ongoing threat.

Distressing memories, feelings and nightmares of the trauma

People with PTSD often re-experience the traumatic event in the present, in the form of repeated and intrusive distressing memories of the trauma, even when they are trying not to think about it.

There may be a feeling of reliving the traumatic event through flashbacks, where the person may lose track with the here-and-now and feel as though they are back in the traumatic event.

This can be very disorientating and upsetting. People can also struggle with distressing nightmares of the traumatic event that can wake them up from sleep and be so distressing that they cannot get back to sleep.

Avoiding thinking, remembering and reminders of the trauma

A person with PTSD may want to avoid thinking about or remembering a traumatic event, and try to push these thoughts and memories aside in their mind.

There may be things that the person wants to avoid doing or being around in case that thing triggers a distressing memory coming back to them; these are all examples of what we call avoidance and often leads to a person's life becoming much smaller in terms of what they can still comfortably do.

Avoidance is also one of the things that stops someone from being able to recover from a traumatic event.

Still feeling in danger after the trauma

People with PTSD often feel a sense that even though the traumatic event is over, things continue to feel dangerous. We call this an ongoing sense of threat. As a result of this feeling, people with PTSD may feel constantly on-edge and unable to let their guard down.

They might be very easily startled if there is a sudden noise, and constantly looking for potential danger in their surroundings; we call these sorts of behaviours hyper-vigilance.

For people with PTSD, these features cause significant problems in being able to function in their personal, family, social, educational or work life.

Other features of PTSD

- People with PTSD often struggle with their sleep, finding it difficult to fall asleep and stay asleep for long enough. This might be because of a combination of not being able to relax, and having nightmares waking them up from sleep.
- It can be common for people with PTSD to have difficult emotions like feeling irritable and angry or numb and disconnected from other people. They may also blame themselves for what happened, and feel guilty, disgusted or ashamed, even if it wasn't their fault. Sometimes these thoughts and feelings can have an impact upon their relationships.
- Some people with PTSD may forget significant parts of the traumatic event, whilst others will think about the event all the time, which might stop them from coming to terms with it. They may, for example, ask themselves why the event happened to them or how it could have been avoided.

- Sometimes people with PTSD can feel so overwhelmed that they feel disconnected from their body or sense of themselves.

They might go into a daze and lose track of time. They might feel like their surroundings are dream-like or changed in different ways. They might not remember much of what they were doing whilst this was going on.

We call this type of experience dissociation; it is a common feature in many mental health conditions and it usually does not last for very long.

- It is not uncommon for people with PTSD to also have other mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety and problems using drugs and alcohol alongside PTSD.

Having PTSD has also been associated with an increased chance of having other physical health problems like heart disease, gut health issues and chronic pain conditions.



What is CPTSD?

Complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD) is the name given to another, related mental health condition that can occur after any type traumatic event, but tends to occur more commonly after chronic, repeated or prolonged traumas where it is nearly impossible to escape from, such as childhood abuse, childhood emotional neglect, domestic violence, or exposure to sustained civil war, torture or community violence.

CPTSD is a relatively new diagnosis and it is a really positive step in understanding and identifying people who have a more complex response to a traumatic event, or events.

People with CPTSD have all the characteristic features of PTSD as well as additional difficulties in how they experience their emotions, having negative thoughts and feelings about themselves and how they form relationships with other people.

Features of CPTSD

■ Regulating emotions

People with CPTSD can struggle to cope with distressing feelings, and their usual strategies to calm down and regulate their feelings don't work as well.

This means that relatively small triggers can lead to overwhelming feelings, or feeling numb and detached. This often stems from a sense of being permanently unsafe, an associated state of hyper-vigilance and an inability to relax, and a belief one will soon experience catastrophic life-events.

■ Negative thoughts and feelings

Traumatic events, particularly those associated with harm from others, can have a really corrosive impact on a person's self-worth and self-confidence.

People with CPTSD often think about themselves in a persistently negative way, such as feeling worthless, hopeless, damaged or a failure wrapped up in a profound sense of personal shame. This can lead to avoidance and suppression strategies such as alcohol and substance abuse and a compulsion to prove oneself in career environments through overworking.

■ Disturbances in relationships

Due to the harm they have suffered at the hands of others, people with CPTSD can understandably experience difficulties in trusting people and maintaining good relationships.

This can have a big impact on their social functioning and ability to form supportive relationships that are so important when recovering from a traumatic event.

Is CPTSD the same as Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)?

No, CPTSD and BPD are separate conditions, but they have features that overlap with each other.

People with BPD typically struggle with feelings that can change rapidly over the course of the day, not having a clear sense of how they feel about themselves, acting impulsively, getting into relationships but having a lot of fear that loved ones will abandon them, and repeated thoughts about or acts of self-harm or suicide.

In contrast, people with CPTSD tend to have a clear but negative sense of how they feel about themselves, and tend to avoid close relationships.

People can develop BPD after traumatic events, but some people develop BPD without any history of trauma. Some people with BPD might have features of PTSD or CPTSD at the same time.

Establishing someone's diagnosis can be very helpful to help people understand what they are experiencing and to guide what treatments may work best for them. It is, however, important to remember that people with PTSD and CPTSD present in different ways and the experience and appropriate management of symptoms should be personalised.

Assessment, treatment and practical advice

Please also see our [Helping PTSD and CPTSD leaflet](#) for more information on how to get help and what can be offered.



Lived experience of CPTSD

Michael Davitt, an author and contributor to the NCMH blog, writes about and illustrates his experience with CPTSD:

"When I started therapy it felt like there was a huge granite block in my mind that was standing in the way of my progress. It was a strange feeling.

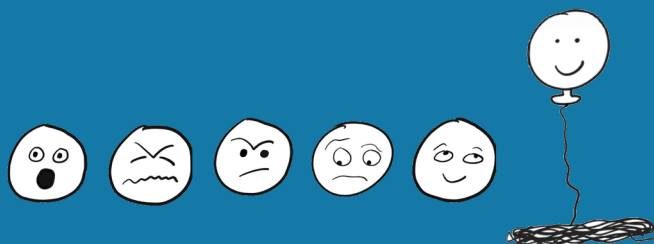
"Some of the themes I discussed in therapy included affirmation, autonomy, self-respect, existential fear, illegitimacy, depression, shame and so many more.

"The aim of my therapy was to drill down through all these 'floors' of emotions, dig to the foundations and rebuild from the bottom up.

"Therapy brought all repressed emotions, feelings and memories from my subconscious self to my conscious self, allowing me to reassess, reinterpret, understand and re-frame them in a proper and rational manner.

"Rise above your childhood trauma by acknowledging you need help, revisiting the pain, processing and reframing your experiences, recognising your inherent self-worth and enjoying the fruits of your labour."

Read more on our blog ncmh.info/my-complex-ptsd



Useful websites

■ Traumatic Stress Wales

Traumatic Stress Wales is funded by Welsh Government and aims to improve the health and wellbeing of people of all ages living in Wales at risk of developing or with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD)

traumaticstress.nhs.wales/

■ National Center for PTSD

Tools and information to help with a range of PTSD related symptoms and problems

ptsd.va.gov

■ NICE

Information on recommended treatments and downloadable leaflets

guidance.nice.org.uk/CG26

■ Royal College of Psychiatrists

Information about PTSD with versions in other languages.

Search PTSD from the homepage

rcpsych.ac.uk

■ All Wales Veterans Health and Wellbeing Service

Support for military veterans and those trying to help them

veteranswales.co.uk

■ International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies

Information and resources for the public, for professionals and those involved in research.

istss.org

Help with our PTSD research

The National Centre for Mental Health (NCMH) is working to better understand PTSD. The aim of our research is to improve diagnosis, treatment and support for the future.

But to do this we need **your** help.

Helping with our research is easy - it involves completing an online survey which should take around 10-15 minutes to complete. It asks questions about your:

- personal information, like date of birth and ethnicity
- mental and physical health
- lifestyle

To take part, visit www.ncmh.info/help or contact us:



info@ncmh.info



/walesmentalhealth



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youtube.com



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