

Don't Get Trapped By Trauma: Part 2

What do we mean by trauma?

The after-effects of trauma can be a disconcerting, even frightening experience, as we described in the Introduction (Part 1 of this series).

When we experience something difficult or upsetting, even if it troubles us for a few hours, even a few days or weeks, we will eventually make sense of it and put it to the back of our minds. It becomes a memory that we can return to if we want to but which won't come in uninvited; and if it does, we can look at it and put it to the back of our minds once more.

On the other hand, if something more serious i.e. a traumatic experience/event happens, instead of being able to eventually make sense of it and store it as a memory, the traumatic event and its associated emotions, feelings, thoughts and images, get stuck in our mind. It's like a story that has no ending. A film that is on an everlasting loop we can't get out of.

So how would we recognise that we're experiencing the effects of trauma? What signs we should look for?

Typically, traumatic symptoms will include some or all of the following:

- Intrusion (the inability to keep memories of the event from returning, uninvited, at random moments; intrusive dreams and flashbacks)
- Avoidance /or numbing (an attempt to avoid stimuli and situations that may trigger and bring back those memories);
- Hyper arousal (similar to jumpiness; this may include insomnia, a tendency to be easily startled, a constant feeling that danger or disaster is nearby; extreme levels of irritability and anxiety)
- Hypo arousal (a shutting down of the senses which can drain energy, affect our ability to focus and make the most basic decisions)
- Depression that doesn't lift
- Disturbance to normal sleep pattern

In summary then, trauma involves any threat to life or our well-being which overwhelms the mind's defences to cope. Trauma can invoke a feeling of extreme helplessness, fear and anxiety and even fear for one's survival. It is the piercing of the body's and mind's defences which triggers an extreme response in our brain in order to cope.

Post Traumatic Stress symptoms can happen at any time – even years on. Why?

Trauma has no respect for time. For some, distressing feelings relating to a traumatic experience can feel ever present: they live in a state of hyper vigilance, feeling constantly anxious about when the next trauma might occur. This state of heightened awareness is normal for trauma survivors. One survivor described it as, "It's like waiting for the next truck to come from behind and take me out. I never know when it's going to happen."

Other trauma survivors may not even recognise they have been affected because they wouldn't say they experience this level of debilitating anxiety in their everyday lives. For these people the trauma can lie buried in their subconscious for years and it's only when something happens that reminds them of what occurred all that time ago that the memory comes flooding back. This is called a

trigger event. It can be a repeat of the same traumatic event. However, often it is not directly related. It could be something similar – a loud noise, a smell, or a situation that makes the person feel like they did at the time e.g. a feeling of being out of control, powerless, unsafe, or at fault. In these moments the trauma recall feels as fresh as the moment of the trauma itself, disrupting daily living and relationships.

In the next part (Part 3), we'll look at the science behind trauma: how details associated with traumatic events - images, thoughts and feelings - become stored in the brain in a way that's different from other less upsetting experiences and how when that happens it triggers an extreme response which we know as flight/fight/freeze.