

## Natural terror causes long term stress too

Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a prolonged and sometimes delayed anxiety disorder resulting from a traumatic event.

PTSD is a serious psychological reaction that some people develop after an overwhelmingly frightening or traumatic experience, especially an experience that threatens life or safety.

Most people who experience a traumatic event will have emotional and psychological reactions (e.g. fear, sadness, guilt, anger) that reduce with time. However, some people develop the longer lasting condition of PTSD.

Official recognition was given to the condition in 1980 following the Vietnam War. While the majority of cases of PTSD are indeed war related – war veterans, peace-keeping forces and refugees are all at high risk – it is now realised that trauma other than war can cause PTSD.

People at risk of suffering PTSD include victims of natural disasters, (for instance, flood, fire, famine and earthquake), serious motor vehicle accidents and crimes such as rape, assault, armed hold-up and kidnap. The terrorist attacks in New York, Bali, Madrid and London and now Pakistan are events that will have left the family and friends of victims severely traumatised. Also at high risk are emergency services personnel, including police, fire-fighters and health workers, such as those involved in rescue operations.

In the context of recent local events, people who have suffered as a result of the fires in Victoria and the floods in Queensland are very much at risk of PTSD.

In an effort to increase awareness of PTSD and to explain where to get the best help and advice, the Commonwealth Department of Veterans Affairs, together with the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, have produced an information card which is now available from pharmacies providing Pharmacy Self Care health information.

Having feelings of stress and anxiety after a traumatic event is quite normal, and most people will recover from even intense traumatic stress within a few months. However, it seems some people are more likely to suffer severely, with long term consequences.

Symptoms may occur immediately after the event, or may be delayed for months or years. Also, symptoms may vary greatly from person to person. These symptoms might include, depression and/or anxiety, difficulty sleeping – often due to distressing dreams – flashbacks of the event, rage and anger, avoidance of thoughts or conversations about the event and feelings of guilt or shame.

Some people drink alcohol heavily when under stress. Alcohol will not help PTSD and may make it worse. It is important to know that alcohol will impair driving and the ability to work, may make you feel depressed and may increase side effects of PTSD medicines. It will also increase sedation from anti-anxiety medicines.

If you or someone in your family is suffering with PTSD it is important to seek help. Your local doctor can advise you. Following a traumatic event, immediate counselling may be helpful; but remember, no matter how long ago the event occurred, treatment can still be effective.

Management of PTSD often involves a number of different strategies including: education about the condition; counselling, support from other PTSD sufferers and family members; treatment programs (e.g. anger management) and reducing reliance on alcohol or inappropriate medicines if this is a problem.

There are several self care strategies that will help as well. Try to cut down on cigarettes and alcohol – these can make stress worse. Exercise regularly and use relaxation techniques and accept the support of your friends and family; studies show this helps recovery.

For more information about PTSD, ask at your local PSA Self Care Pharmacy for a copy of the fact card. For the nearest location call 1 300 369 772 or check out the Pharmaceutical Society's website at [www.psa.org.au](http://www.psa.org.au)