

# Understanding how trauma can affect us.

People who experience trauma are often resilient and find various ways to cope and live a full life. However, trauma can have a significant impact on people's wellbeing in a variety of ways.

Trauma is a very personal thing. What can be traumatic for one person can be of less significance to others. Sometimes people may think *'why have I been affected so badly by this and others haven't?'*

Lots of things can contribute to how you respond and experience a traumatic event. This includes:

- an individual's personality, beliefs and values
- how old you are at the time of the event,
- how supported you were or felt at the time. For example, did you feel to blame, could you talk about how you were feeling to others, did you get reassurance/safety from others?

Trauma doesn't have to have lasting effects. Any traumatic event is bound to be upsetting when it actually happens. For example, it is normal to be shaky, tearful and frightened for days or weeks after an assault or a car crash, but if you can talk to friends and family and are believed and supported, you are much more likely to be able to put the event behind you and get on with your life.

However, recent research has shown that trauma can often have serious and lasting effects on people's mental health. Trauma is more likely to affect us when it is long term and complex, and when we had no one to believe, protect and support us. If you felt that the trauma was a shameful secret, or an abuser told you not to tell anyone, or you believed that the trauma was your fault, or you were trapped for years in an abusive relationship, you are much more likely to suffer mental health problems.

It is very common for people who access mental health services to have experienced trauma and adversity at some point in their lives. Therefore, when we are trying to understand the reasons for mental health difficulties it makes much more sense to think about *'what has happened to you'* and *'what do you need'* rather than *'what is wrong with you'*.

Trauma can affect how we feel, think, and relate to others in various ways. The table below gives some examples of how trauma can impact on how we think, feel, behave and the impact on the body.

Impact on thoughts/what you think/goes through your mind	Impact on emotions/how you feel
<p>Images and memories of the trauma which come into your mind without warning, or 'flashbacks'. These are often very vivid often with the same intensity as at the time it happened.</p> <p>Nightmares about the trauma</p> <p>Believing that the trauma was your fault or that you should have been able to stop it happening, and blaming yourself.</p> <p>Being unable to make sense of what happened to you 'why me?'</p> <p>Having a very low opinion of yourself.</p> <p>Poor concentration, racing thoughts, memory difficulties.</p>	<p>Experiencing intense emotions of distress, sadness, shame, anger, bitterness, guilt and low mood.</p> <p>Feeling anxious, fearful and panicky</p> <p>Feeling tense, irritable and 'on edge'</p> <p>Finding it very hard to cope with these overwhelming feelings or calm yourself down</p> <p>Feeling unmotivated, helpless and powerless.</p> <p>Feeling numb or unreal and cut off from your emotions</p>
Impact on Behaviour /what you do	Impact on the body
<p>Avoiding anything that reminds you of the trauma e.g. avoid going to certain places, watching the news.</p> <p>Isolating yourself from other people, including family and partners.</p> <p>Being unable to unwind and relax – having to do things all the time to keep busy</p> <p>Giving up your usual hobbies and activities</p> <p>Turning to drugs, cigarettes or alcohol to cope</p> <p>Self-harming to relieve your feelings</p>	<p>Feeling on the alert all the time, so that you are easily startled.</p> <p>Heart racing, stiff muscles</p> <p>Not being able to sleep</p> <p>Exhaustion because of being constantly on edge and not sleeping.</p> <p>In the longer term, increasing the risk of some physical health problems and chronic fatigue or chronic pain</p>

As well as some the difficulties in the table above, people who have experienced trauma may also experience other difficulties such as difficulties in relationships, difficulties managing or tolerating their feelings as well as experiences such as hearing voices or having visions. Let's explain more...

### **Difficulties trusting others**

It is not surprising that people who have been hurt by others, sometimes by the people who were supposed to look after them, have difficulties with trust. People describe swinging between hope (thinking that at last someone understands them and can help them) and distrust (suddenly becoming terrified that they are going to be betrayed again). It may feel safer to cut yourself off from other people and not to confide in anyone.

### **Difficulties managing feelings**

People who have experienced multiple, complex traumas may find it difficult to cope with their feelings. They may find their emotions overwhelming, difficult to label or know what they are feeling. It is understanding then that these intense and overwhelming feelings are difficult to control. For example someone may feel full of anger, guilt, shame and fear. Some people describe finding it very hard to calm themselves when they are upset, and may turn to drink, drugs or self-harm to relieve their feelings.

Sometimes the only way to cope is to cut off or 'dissociate' from these feelings. This is a very common experience. It can happen without trying, as it is our brain's way of keeping us safe and happens automatically. As a result, memories may be fragmented, and people may feel out of contact with their feelings and their bodies. This is explored in more detail in the section on 'Dissociation.' You might also find it helpful to watch the 'window of tolerance' video.

### **Low self-esteem/negative sense of self.**

Many people, especially those who have experienced trauma as a child or for prolonged periods of time, over years in long term relationships, develop a very low self-worth leading to high levels of shame, guilt and unworthiness or feeling unlovable. They may develop very negative or harsh 'inner critics' – a harsh self-critical inner voice which may echo/repeat past abusers or trauma experience. Having a low self-esteem can lead to difficulties within relationships. For example feel unworthy can make it difficult to set firm and safe boundaries and can lead to people pleasing, difficulties getting your own needs met and at times staying in toxic situations or relationships and suffering further abuse or trauma.

### **Voices and/or visions**

Some people have voices and visions, which simply means that they are hearing, seeing or sensing something that others around them are not. This can occur in all five senses, hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch, sometimes in combination. Research suggests that people who hear voices that others do not hear are very much more likely to have experienced traumas of various kinds. It is now thought that hearing voices, especially if they are critical and hostile, can be understood as a kind of memory of the abuse. This makes sense given that voices often sound like the abuser, or say the things the abuser said, or express the same feelings of shame and guilt that the person has about themselves as a result of the abuse. This is discussed in more detail in the section on 'Hearing voices.'

If you have very strong beliefs about people pursuing you or spying on you or being out to get you, or plotting against you, this may also be a reaction to trauma. It is not surprising that the world may seem a very dangerous place after what you have been through. Sometimes these realistic fears seem to get exaggerated, and it is hard to work out what is true and what is not. This is discussed in the section on 'Unusual beliefs.'

Here are some examples of what people who have faced traumatic events in their life have told us:

It is like I am reliving the same situation over again. I feel frightened that it is happening again. Sometimes I wake up at night and I am holding onto

My feelings are so overwhelming and I feel in pain emotionally and physically. I feel exhausted. I use alcohol and drugs to block off my feelings.

I can't trust others .spe

I hear voices that tell me I'm a bad person and should kill myself.

I feel that everything that happened was my fault as I did not stop it. I am to blame and feel ashamed.

I keep being in relationships with men who hurt me. It's like I have 'abuse me' tattooed on my

I harm myself to cope when I feel bad.

I feel detached from friends and family and feel lonely and misunderstood.

I'm very alert to all sources of threat. I don't want to go out in case I am hurt.

I feel cut off from my feelings and what is going on around me. I lose periods of time and don't know what has happened.

## Recovery from the effects of trauma

Many people who have experienced trauma can recover without lasting difficulties. Usually difficulties reduce after about a month following the incident. However, some people struggle to cope following trauma and need further support.

Any of the upsetting experiences described in this leaflet can lead people to wonder if they are going mad. This is not true. People who have been traumatised are having a *normal reaction to an abnormal situation*. Our minds and bodies are made to protect us from harm by, for example, avoiding situations that might be dangerous, or keeping us very alert so we can avoid future risk. Sometimes these reactions get stuck so that we carry on reacting as though the danger is still happening. We need to learn to undo these reactions, which is difficult but not impossible.

Some individual's may be described as having Post- Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Complex-PTSD and may benefit from further help and support. PTSD and C-PTSD are diagnostic terms that services might use to try to help understand your experiences and consider the most useful types of treatments/interventions.

It is very important to remember that you **can** recover. You will not forget what happened to you, but you can learn to manage the distress so that it no longer controls your life as it may do now. Even if you have more unusual experiences such as hearing voices or having beliefs that are not shared by others, you can still learn to cope with these reactions so that they do not dominate your life. With the help of the sections on this website, mental health professionals, friends or family, you can start to overcome the effects of the trauma so that you can look towards the future.

REMEMBER YOU HAVE ALREADY DONE VERY WELL TO HAVE SURVIVED. AT THE MOMENT, YOUR MIND AND BODY MAY BE LIVING IN WHAT IS SOMETIMES CALLED 'TRAUMA TIME' – AS IF THE TRAUMA WAS STILL HAPPENING, OR ABOUT TO HAPPEN AGAIN. RECOVERY IS ACHIEVED WHEN YOUR MIND AND BODY BOTH LEARN THAT THE TRAUMA IS OVER, YOU HAVE SURVIVED IT, AND YOU ARE SAFE NOW.