Post-traumatic stress disorder: what to do when trauma takes over

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is something that happens to some people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event. Traumatic events may include, but are not limited to, experiencing a natural disaster, an industrial accident, an act of war, a robbery, sexual assault or abuse. Often, a person's response to the event can involve intense fear, helplessness or horror.

PTSD is recognized as a possible diagnosis when a number of symptoms and behaviours have been present for at least one month, and are causing significant distress or making life difficult to work or function normally with people close to you.

If the trauma is severe, sustained or if there is little or no support to recover from the trauma, PTSD can occur. Rather than diminishing with time, sufferers report an increase in frequency and intensity of symptoms.

What do I look for?

If you think that you or someone you know is suffering from PTSD, consider if any of the following symptoms are present:

- **Persistent and intrusive reliving and re-experiencing of the traumatic event.** A person may report feeling as if they are reliving moments of the trauma, complete with physical and emotional reactions.
- **Numbing of emotions and/or a withdrawal from social interactions.** Family or friends may comment that the victim of PTSD no longer seems interested in previously pleasurable activities or hobbies. One's partner may comment about a decrease in the emotional intimacy of the relationship. The suffering individual may go to extreme efforts to avoid a specific location or route associated with the traumatic event. They may avoid co-workers or others who also experienced the trauma, or any other reminder of the traumatic event.
- **Increased agitation or level of alertness.** Changed sleeping patterns and complaints of insomnia are common. Individuals may experience difficulty concentrating, remembering or completing tasks. People may exhibit "jumpiness," or may be easily startled. Some people display uncharacteristically aggressive behaviour in response to low-level stressors.

Who is likely to experience PTSD?

Not everyone who lives through or witnesses a traumatic event will develop PTSD. Different people have different levels of resilience, social support or strategies to cope with any traumatic event. The following factors can have an impact on how well one copes with a traumatic event:

- Other stressors experienced by the individual at the time of the incident, such as recent bereavement, change in relationship, job change or job loss, may negatively affect how well one copes.
- A previous history of other traumatic events in a person's life may make it more likely for an individual to develop PTSD.
- Access to and the existence of a healthy support network greatly helps individuals in dealing with trauma. A supportive partner, close family or friends, and co-workers are the most likely sources of support. Physicians and therapists provided through the employer are also support systems that should be considered.
- One's overall physical and emotional health at the time of the traumatic event can either heighten or diminish an individual's ability to cope.

What to do?

If you recognize any of the above symptoms or behaviours in yourself, a loved one or a colleague, it’s important to discuss these further with a health professional. Only a physician or a trained mental health professional can determine if a person is suffering from PTSD. Once you have confirmed the diagnosis of PTSD, you can begin the process of healing, with the assistance of your physician or mental health professional.

Who can help?

After discussion and an examination, a physician may prescribe medication to help stabilize emotions and aid in re-establishing regular sleep patterns. Also, a therapist experienced in the effects and treatment of PTSD can be helpful for many people. A physician or community clinic can refer you to one.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, group therapy and Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing therapy (EMDR) are some of the current treatment interventions for PTSD. A physician or therapist will help you select the most appropriate treatment method for you.

Any traumatic event can be stressful and have a significant impact on emotions and lives of those affected. If you think that you or someone you know is suffering from PTSD, know that it is usually temporary. With the advice and assistance of a physician or mental health professional, you can expect that you will soon be on the road to recovery.