



Post-Traumatic Stress – A Brief Description

by Linda Bishopp, MA Psychotherapy & Healing, Dip, Couns, Reg MBACP, MCThA, MTHF

PTSD is often associated with military veterans returning from war zones - however - PTSD often refers to one major traumatic incident so could be anything that traumatises someone eg a car accident or some other major or shocking incident.

Complex PTSD refers to a series of several traumatic incidents and mostly associated with domestic abuse such as psychological or violent abuse within a relationship, or sexual abuse of children.

Trauma does a lot of things to our brains and bodies that means that people experiencing trauma often can't process or remember new information.

Trauma is a physiological process - it's an animal response to danger i.e. in primitive terms - it's how an animal will respond to the threat of death.

You've probably all heard of the stress response - when large amounts of adrenalin is released into the body. This creates physical effects - blood rushes away from the digestive system and into muscles so that a rapid physical response can happen - fight or flight, or the freeze effect - the often-unmentioned part of the stress response. When a very large trauma response occurs, or a trauma is repeated over time, this effect can become effectively frozen in the body.

This is dealt with much better by animals, who usually actually shake this out of the body immediately after the incident. You sometimes see this in natural history films - where an animal has been chased by a predator and escapes. You then see it twitching and shaking for a few moments before running away. This is the shake response.

However, humans have become conditioned not to shake, so the effect becomes stored in the body. This changes the body bio-chemically and people can become permanently hyper-vigilant i.e. permanently alert to the potential danger of death.

Common symptoms of PTSD and cPTSD:

- Exaggerated jump reflex - at the slightest noise
- Nightmares - often of the traumatic events
- Dissociation - the feeling response disappears; the person feels numb and can't respond emotionally very well - so the feeling brain and thinking brain can part company
- Thus, intellectual capacity is reduced
- Memory is lost
- People can be unable to verbalise how they feel
- The digestion ceases to function well (IBS and other digestive issues)
- People can become frightened to leave the house
- Distracted, can't concentrate or be fully present in the moment
- Anxiety and nervousness
- Panic attacks - something can trigger these - a loud noise, a smell associated with the trauma
- Mood swings - trouble regulating emotions - get aggressive or angry very quickly - can lose friends, alienate family
- Get intrusive thoughts and flashbacks to the trauma - these can be so strong that the person behaves as though in the memory - the traumatic event i.e. attacking wife as seen as attacker from the past.
- Insomnia - body flooded with cortisol - triggers alertness
- Substance abuse - used to calm down and soothe i.e. alcohol, drugs, binge eating
- Sexual promiscuity - could be from child abuse (i.e. inappropriate boundaries around sex) or avoiding sex all together

It is possible to completely recover with therapy which can normalise symptoms and explain what can happen with trauma - a therapist becomes someone at their side that enables a safe place to be created. They are not alone and can develop more resilience and eventually do move forward and recover.