

Post-Traumatic Stress – A Brief Description

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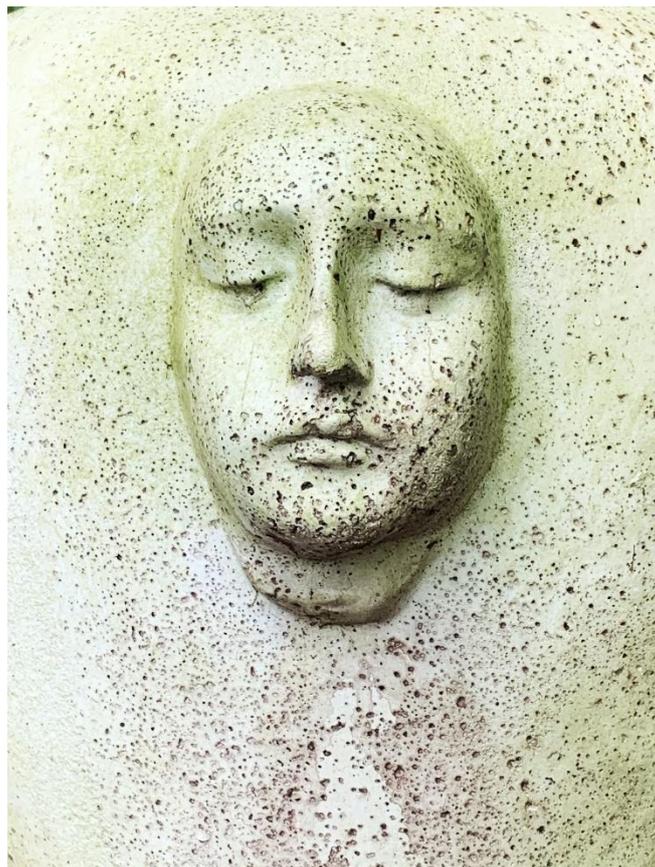
PTSD is often associated with military veterans returning from war zones, however, also can apply to single incident traumas, so could be anything that traumatises someone e.g., a car accident or some other major or shocking incident like a tsunami or volcanic eruption.

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

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

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

You've probably all heard of the stress response - when a large amount 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, and the freeze and fawn effects. With the freeze response the effect can become frozen in the body, or the fawn effect, when the person will capitulate in order not to be punished or even be killed.



Trauma 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 can become '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 cannot 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, cannot 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 recover with therapy which can normalise symptoms and explain what can happen, and support you to develop skills to manage symptoms, which eventually diminish. A therapist becomes someone at your side that enables a safe place to be created. You are not alone and can develop more resilience and eventually move forward and recover.

