

Overcoming Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



THE KEIL CENTRE
CHARTERED PSYCHOLOGISTS

At some time in our lives all of us experience upsetting events, such as the loss of a loved one or serious illness. Although it takes time, such events are not outside the range of normal human experience and our brain eventually comes to terms with these events. However, when we encounter something extremely traumatic, such as an accident, being assaulted or seeing other people being killed or badly hurt, it is an emotional shock and our brain struggles to come to terms with what happened.

Following such a traumatic incident, it is normal to have feelings of emotional numbness or detachment, feeling shocked or dazed, a sense of unreality, difficulty making sense of what has happened, sleep disturbance, nightmares and even repeated thoughts or memories of the event. For most people, these feelings will fade within the next few weeks. For others, these distressing experiences can persist for months or even years. If you have experienced a traumatic event and continue to be troubled by distressing images, nightmares or thoughts of the incident, feel detached or emotionally numb, cannot sleep properly, feel down or extremely anxious, fear for your personal safety or now avoid thoughts or places associated with the event, it is possible that you might be suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In general, the more severe the trauma and the longer the person is exposed to it, the greater the likelihood of developing PTSD.

There are three main categories of PTSD symptoms, and all three must be present for the diagnosis of PTSD: Firstly, symptoms of **re-experiencing the traumatic event**, such as flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive memories and exaggerated emotional and physical reactions to triggers that remind the person of the trauma. Secondly, symptoms of **emotional numbing and avoidance**, such as feeling detached or numb, losing interest in things you normally enjoy, having a different attitude toward the future, and avoiding thoughts, places or activities that remind you of the incident. Thirdly, **symptoms of heightened anxiety and arousal**, such as restlessness, difficulty sleeping, poor concentration, irritability, being hyper alert to what is going on around you and being easily startled. Some people are also troubled by a sense of guilt, for example because of certain things they had to do to cope or because they survived when others did not.

PTSD causes considerable disruption, stress and suffering to the victim as well as impacting upon their loved ones and family. A lot of victims want to withdraw from the world and it can become hard or even impossible to work, to maintain relationships and get on with everyday life.

Psychological therapy or counselling can be very beneficial in helping victims gain control over their symptoms and learn that they can cope with life again. They might need to talk through their memories and feelings about the event to help them move on. Therapy can teach the brain how to file away the distressing memories so that they no longer impact upon daily life. The most useful approaches are often practical, teaching the sufferer specific techniques to help them cope and recover from the symptoms and to help the brain make sense of what happened. Here at the Keil Centre, we use a number of such approaches; for example anxiety management, cognitive behavioural therapy and EMDR.