

PTSD – REPETITIVE BAD MEMORIES



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DEAR READER,

There are many incidents that can throw us off course but we still manage to cope with them. However, people sometimes experience things so terrible that they continue to haunt them for a long time and make them mentally ill. In this case, they may be suffering from **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder** (in short: PTSD). PTSD is a psychiatric disorder that can occur at any age. In this leaflet we provide information on PTSD in adults. Furthermore, it explains the treatment options available to you.

At a glance: PTSD

- PTSD is a mental disorder. It can be set off by a stressful event such as war, disaster or an accident.
- The incident may permanently impair a person's life. The victims recall the horror again and again in their thoughts and dreams. They react by withdrawing and avoiding intrusive memories. They are irritable and constantly on the alert.
- Trauma-focussed psychotherapy has been shown to help and is the first-line treatment. Medication and other procedures may accompany the treatment.

▶ WHAT IS THE CAUSE?

Life-threatening events or situations can trigger PTSD. They include war, violence, sexual abuse, natural disasters or a serious illness. Experts use the term *traumatic experience* or trauma. It is often difficult to come to terms with these very distressing experiences. It may also affect people who have not experienced a traumatic situation themselves but have seen it. For instance, someone who has witnessed a serious accident may fall ill.

▶ HOW DOES PTSD MANIFEST ITSELF?

Around 2 to 3 out of a 100 people are affected every year by PTSD in Germany.

Symptoms may appear immediately after a disturbing event or weeks or even months later. The symptoms may persist for a long time. The signs are:

- **Persistent stressful memories:** People with PTSD experience the horrifying event time and time again, for instance in dreams. Flashbacks may also occur. They suddenly feel they are back in the past and relive the event all over again. Feelings of fear of dying and helplessness resurface. Furthermore, the memory may take a physical form, for instance trembling or palpitations.
- **Avoidance of situations and feelings:** To avoid awakening memories, many affected people consciously avoid situations, places or activities that may be a reminder of what they have experienced. This may include noises or smells.
- **Withdrawn and apathetic behaviour:** They often lose interest in other people. People with PTSD may shut themselves away and be indifferent to others. Furthermore, they are not able to feel happy about anything.
- **Nervous tense mood:** People with PTSD are often jumpy and don't sleep well. Some feel constantly threatened or are always on their guard (hypervigilance) although, viewed from the outside, there is no real threat.

Frequently, PTSD goes hand in hand with other mental conditions such as fear, panic, depression or addiction. Many people even contemplate committing suicide.

► HOW CAN PTSD BE DIAGNOSED?

If you observe symptoms of PTSD in yourself, you should consult a doctor or a psychotherapist. In many places there are special outpatient trauma clinics. During the consultation the doctor or therapist will ask about typical PTSD symptoms, your life situation and other physical or mental disorders. The traumatic experience and the time before it will also be discussed. Questionnaires or tests can provide additional pointers.

► HOW CAN I BE HELPED?

Good treatment can provide you with effective help. Even if untreated, PTSD can improve over time. However, if not treated, the disorder may become permanent: in 20 to 30 out of 100 people, PTSD may result in persistent symptoms.

The following treatment options are available:

- **Trauma-focussed psychotherapy:** There are various psychotherapeutic approaches *trauma-focussed psychotherapy* is the most effective treatment for PTSD. In comparison to other psychotherapy procedures and medication, it constitutes the best way of alleviating the symptoms. This has been documented in reliable studies. It should, therefore, be offered to everyone with PTSD. This type of therapy encompasses trauma-focussed cognitive behaviour therapy (TF-CBT) and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR). Both types of therapy help to process memories of what has been experienced. In the case of EMDR, with the help of eye movements and, in the case of TF-CBT, for instance with exposure. In an exposure setting, the affected individuals learn to confront the situation in their thoughts or in reality.

► MORE INFORMATION

This information is based on the S3 Guideline "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder" (AWMF [Association of the Scientific Medical Societies in Germany] reg. no. 155-001).

Methodology and other sources: www.patienten-information.de/kurzinformationen/ptbs#methodik

Other short information leaflets on health topics: www.patienten-information.de

Contact to self-help groups

You can find out from NAKOS (national contact and information office for the encouragement and support of self-help groups) where there is a self-help group in your area: www.nakos.de, tel.: 030 3101 8960

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- **Medication:** Psychotropic drugs may be considered to treat mental disorders. In the case of PTSD they should not be prescribed as the first-line treatment. Experts advise against treating PTSD solely with medication as it is less effective than psychotherapy.

If you and your doctor should nonetheless consider medication, preference should be given to medication containing the active ingredients *sertraline*, *paroxetine* or *venlafaxine*.

Benzodiazepines are sedatives and depressants. They do not cure PTSD and may cause more harm than good. So, you should avoid taking this kind of medication.

- **Additional procedures:** Other procedures can complement your treatment. They include, for instance, occupational therapy, art therapy, music therapy, therapeutic exercise, movement therapy or physiotherapy. However, no efficacy studies are available or the data are too sparse.

► WHAT CAN I DO?

- It is often difficult to obtain an appointment in a psychotherapy practice. Seek out people who can help you, for instance your GP or trusted family members. Addresses of psychotherapy practices can be accessed at www.kbv.de/html/arztsuche.php.
- Support in conjunction with sexual abuse can be accessed on the help portal www.hilfe-portal-missbrauch.de.
- Discuss the advantages and drawbacks of the individual procedures with your therapist or doctor. You can then decide together on the best treatment option for you.
- It may help to talk to other affected people, for instance in self-help groups.

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