



# Post Traumatic Stress

A self help guide  
for people in prison

#BreakTheSilence  
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# **Post Traumatic Stress**

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## **These are thoughts and feelings of two people who have experienced traumatic incidents.**

“I feel terrible, very restless and irritable. This is not like me at all. The car crash happened 6 months ago but I still couldn’t feel safe in a car. Pictures of the accident come flashing into my mind, they won’t go away and even at night my dreams are more like nightmares with scenes of the crash happening again and again... I can’t stop shaking when I think I could have died”

“Everything has changed, I keep thinking why us? I feel guilty thinking that I could have done more to save my friend. I re-live the experience all the time, I keep thinking, ‘if only I had done this, if only I had done that’... I am very low and depressed most of the time... I think of the future...I feel helpless”.

If you have suffered from a traumatic experience yourself, you may have had similar feelings. For example:

- Flashbacks ☐
- Tension ☐
- Nightmares ☐

This booklet is written by psychologists and people who have experienced prison. It aims to help you understand these reactions and offers some practical suggestions to help you cope. If you feel unable to use this booklet other ways of getting help are listed on pages 22-26. You may also be able to ask a prison listener or member of the healthcare team to go through the booklet with you.

## **What is a traumatic incident?**

A traumatic event is something out of the ordinary that happens and is deeply distressing to someone.

Many things can have this impact. It could be a fire, an accident, an attack, being a witness or involved in a traumatic event such as a robbery or even a death. It can be on a large scale, such as a major disaster, involving many people or a personal event involving yourself, friends or family members. Being on trial and sent to prison can also be traumatic.

## **How do people react after a traumatic incident?**

The following are some of the reactions you may experience after a traumatic event. In general, people's reactions will fall into the following five groups:

1. Re-living the trauma in your mind
2. Avoiding things to do with the trauma
3. Feeling more tense, irritable or jumpy than usual
4. Feeling depressed, crying
5. Blaming other or self

It may help you to check to see if you are experiencing any of these symptoms.

### **Re-experiencing the trauma in your mind**

- Having unwanted pictures or images (often called flashbacks) of the distressing event appearing in your mind.
- Having upsetting dreams about the trauma or dreams about other things that frighten you.
- Feeling that the trauma is happening again – strong sensations of re-living the trauma.
- Feeling very distressed at coming across situations or feelings that remind you of the trauma.

- Experiencing distressing physical reactions, e.g. heart beating faster, dizziness, etc. when you are faced with memories of the trauma or situations that remind you of it.

### **Avoiding things related to the trauma and numbing**

- Trying to avoid thoughts, feelings and conversations about the trauma.
- Avoiding activities, places or people that remind you of the trauma.
- Being unable to remember things about the trauma.
- Losing interest in life, feeling detached from others or not having your usual feelings.
- Feeling that you are living on borrowed time.
- Trying not to be seen as weak in front of others.



### **Feeling more tense and irritable than usual**

- Feeling angry or irritable.
- Not being able to concentrate.
- Finding it difficult to fall asleep.
- Feeling over alert all the time and easily startled.
- Lack of tolerance, being unforgiving.

### **Post-traumatic stress reactions can affect us in at least four different ways:**

- How we feel
- The way we think
- The way our body works
- The way we behave



**It may help you understand how you are feeling by placing a tick next to those symptoms you experience regularly:**

**How do you feel?**

- Anxious, nervous, worried, frightened ☐
- Feeling something dreadful is going to happen ☐
- Tense, uptight, on edge, unsettled ☐
- Unreal, strange, woozy, detached ☐
- Depressed ☐

**What happens to your body?**

- Heart races and pounds ☐
- Chest feels tight ☐
- Muscles are tense or stiff ☐
- Feel tired/exhausted ☐
- Body aching ☐
- Feel dizzy, light headed ☐
- Feel panicky ☐
- Feel depressed, low, at a loss ☐
- Feel angry ☐
- Cry ☐

**How do you think?**

- Worry constantly ☐
- Can't concentrate ☐
- Experience flashbacks – pictures of the trauma coming into your mind ☐
- Blame yourself for all or part of the trauma ☐
- Think it will happen again ☐
- Unable to make a decision ☐
- Feel regret, shame or bitterness ☐
- Thoughts racing ☐
- Feel jumpy or restless ☐
- Stomach churning ☐
- Have sleep problems/nightmares ☐
- Easily startled ☐

## What you do

- Pace up and down ☐
- Avoid things that remind you of the trauma ☐
- Can't sit and relax ☐
- Avoid people ☐
- Avoid being alone ☐
- Are snappy and irritable ☐
- Spoil relationship ☐
- Drink/smoke more ☐
- Depend on others too much ☐
- Use drugs ☐

## Common thoughts

- "It was my fault" ☐
- "I'm cracking up" ☐
- "I'm going to have a heart attack" ☐
- "It's controlling me" ☐
- "I can't cope" ☐
- "I'm going to faint" ☐
- "Why did it have to happen" ☐
- "I can't see the point anymore" ☐
- "If only I...." ☐

## Why do we react so strongly to trauma?

There are many reasons why trauma leaves such a strong impact on us.

Firstly, it often shatters the basic beliefs we may have about life: that life is fairly safe and secure, that life for us has a particular form, meaning and purpose. It may be that the image that we have about ourselves is shattered, we may have responded differently from how we expected or wanted to behave.

Secondly, trauma usually occurs suddenly and without warning. We have no time to adjust to this new experience. It will usually be outside our normal range of experience and we are faced

with not knowing what to do or how to behave. You may have felt you were going to die, people around you may have died, you are shocked. In the face of this danger our mind holds on to the memory of the trauma very strongly, probably as a natural form of self-protection to ensure you never get into that situation again. The result of this is that you are left with the post-traumatic reactions described above.

## **What can I do to help overcome the trauma?**

It is important to understand that the reactions you are experiencing are very common following trauma, they are not a sign of weakness or cracking up. The following suggestions may help you begin to cope with the post traumatic reactions. Things that we describe which may help you are:

1. Making sense of the trauma
2. Dealing with flashbacks and nightmares
3. Overcoming tension, irritability and anger
4. Overcoming avoidance
5. Overcoming low mood

### **1. Making sense of the trauma**

Try and find out as much as you can about what really happened. This will allow you to piece together a picture and understanding of the event more clearly. This can help you in your recovery.

If others were involved, talk or write to them and ask them their views of events. Other victims, helpers from the rescue service, or passers by, may all be people who would help you gain a broader view of what happened. The rescue services may be able to help you in these circumstances or someone may contact them on your behalf.

It may help you to think it through with other people. You may feel the trauma has altered your whole view of life. It is helpful to try and clarify how you now feel and talking can help you do this.



Some people talk to a friend, family member, partner or Listener, others may be able to get help through the prison Health Centre or Chaplaincy. Other people have found that it helps to write down their experience.

**Try to spend a few minutes thinking of ways that you may be able to make sense of what you have been through. Try and jot down some ideas:**

- People to talk it over with
- Things you may do yourself, e.g. Write down your experiences

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## **2. Dealing with flashbacks and nightmares**

Many people try to put the experience of trauma behind them by attempting not to think of it. Although this may seem a natural thing to do, it does not always help them to overcome the problem. People may find that they continue to be troubled by unwanted pictures of the trauma in their mind (flashbacks) and by unpleasant dreams or nightmares related to the trauma. One of the best approaches which has been found to reduce flashbacks and nightmares is to make time each day for reviewing and going over the unpleasant memories or nightmares.

Many people have found that if they put time aside to calmly think over, talk over or jot down notes on the trauma, their unwanted flashbacks and nightmares will gradually become less powerful and less frequent. If you have nightmares, it may help to do this soon before you go to bed.

This can allow you to regain some control over these thoughts rather than them intruding upon you. It is important to try and keep calm and relaxed when looking back over the trauma you have experienced, if you possibly can.



**Try the following approaches:**

1. Write down details of the flashbacks or nightmares you experience.

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2. Find a time of day when you could think over what has happened.

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3. Think of some positive things about your current situation: for example, "I survived it and I'm still here", "I can now begin to plan for a new future", "The worst is now over".

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### **3. Overcoming tension, irritability and anger**

Tension, irritability and anger are common aspects of a post-traumatic reaction. There may be physical symptoms too including breathlessness, heart racing, over breathing, dizziness and muscle tension. Try the following ways of reducing physical symptoms.

In order to reduce the severity of physical symptoms it is useful to nip them in the bud, by recognising the early signs of tension.

Once you have noticed early signs of tension, you can prevent anxiety becoming too severe by using relaxation techniques. Some people can relax through exercise, listening to music, watching TV or reading a book.

For others it is more helpful to have a set of exercises to follow. Some people might find relaxation or yoga most helpful, others find tapes useful.

Relaxation is a skill like any other which needs to be learned and takes time. The following exercise teaches deep muscle relaxation and many people find it very helpful in reducing overall levels of tension and anxiety.



#### **Deep muscle relaxation**

It is helpful to read the instructions first and eventually to learn them. Choose a time of day when you feel most relaxed to begin with. Lie down, get comfortable, close your eyes. Concentrate on your breathing for a few minutes, breathing slowly and calmly: in, two-three and out, two-three. Say the words calm or relax to yourself as you breathe out. The relaxation exercise takes you through different muscle groups, teaching you firstly to tense, then relax. You should breathe in

when tensing and breathe out when you relax. Starting with your hands, clench one tightly. Think about the tension this produces in the muscles of your hand and forearm.

Study the tension for a few seconds and then relax your hand. Notice the difference between the tension and the relaxation. You might feel a slight tingling, this is the relaxation beginning to develop.

Do the same with the other hand.

Each time you relax a group of muscles think how they feel when they're relaxed. Don't try to relax, just let go of the tension. Allow your muscles to relax as much as you can. Think about the difference in the way they feel when they're relaxed and when they're tense. Now do the same for the other muscles of your body. Each time, tense them for a few seconds and then relax. Study the way they feel and then let go of the tension in them.

**It is useful to stick to the same order as you work through the muscle groups:**

- **Hands** - clench fist, then relax.
- **Arms** - bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension, especially in your upper arms. Remember, do this for a few seconds and then relax.
- **Neck** - tilt your head back and roll it from side to side slowly. Feel how the tension moves, then bring your head forward into a comfortable position.
- **Face** - there are several muscles here, but it is enough to think about your forehead and jaw. First lower your eyebrows in a frown. Relax your forehead. You can also raise your eyebrows, and then relax. Now, clench your jaw, notice the difference when you relax.



- **Chest** - take a deep breath, hold it for a few seconds, notice the tension, then relax. Let your breathing return to normal.
- **Stomach** - tense your stomach muscles as tightly as you can and relax.
- **Buttocks** - squeeze your buttocks together, and relax.
- **Legs** - straighten your legs and bend your feet towards your face. Finish by wiggling your toes.



**Don't try too hard, just let it happen.**

To make best use of relaxation you need to:

- Practise daily.
- Start to use relaxation in everyday situations.
- Learn to relax without having to tense muscles.
- Use parts of the relaxation to help in difficult situations, e.g. breathing slowly.

Remember, relaxation is a skill like any other and takes time to learn. Keep a note of how anxious you feel before and after relaxation, rating your anxiety 1-10.

### **Grounding techniques**

If you are struggling with flashbacks and feeling detached you can use **grounding techniques** to keep you in the present moment. Use the five senses - sight, sound, touch, smell, taste. The aim is to bring your attention on to the present moment.

- **Sight** - you could focus on things around you, the colours and the textures.

- **Sound** - you could listen to loud music and focus on it.
- **Touch** - you could touch something soft and silky or something smooth and cold and focus on this.
- **Smell** - sniff a strong smell which can bring you in to the present - perfume or nice smelling oils can be a good choice.
- **Taste** - try tasting something strong - a strong mint or chilli or lemon can bring you in to the here and now.

### **Controlled breathing**

Over breathing is very common when someone becomes anxious, angry or irritable. This is sometimes called over breathing. People often begin to gulp air, thinking that they are going to suffocate, or they begin to breathe really quickly. This has the effect of making them feel dizzy and therefore more anxious.

Try to recognise if you are doing this and slow your breathing down. Getting into a regular rhythm of in two-three and out two-three will soon return your breathing to normal. Other people have found breathing into a paper bag or cupped hands helpful. For this to work, you must cover your nose and mouth.

It takes at least three minutes of slow breathing or breathing into a bag for your breathing to return to normal.

### **Mindful breathing**

This is a different approach to managing the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The goal of mindful breathing is calm, non-judging awareness, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them. The aim is to concentrate only on the present moment, not the past and not the future. Much of our anxiety is linked to thoughts and feelings about the past and the future.

Follow these instructions:

Sit comfortably, with your eyes closed or lowered and your back straight.

- Bring your attention to your breathing.
- Imagine that you have a balloon in your stomach. Every time you breathe in, the balloon inflates. Each time you breathe out, the balloon deflates. Notice the sensations as the balloon inflates and deflates. Your chest and stomach rising with the in-breath, and falling with the out-breath.
- Thoughts will come into your mind, and that's okay, because that's just what the mind does. Just notice those thoughts, then bring your attention back to your breathing.
- You can notice sounds, physical feelings, and emotions, and again, just bring your attention back to your breathing.
- Don't follow those thoughts or feelings, don't judge yourself for having them, or analyse them in any way. It's okay for the thoughts to be there. Just notice those thoughts, and let them drift on by; bring your attention back to your breathing.
- Whenever you notice that your attention has drifted off and is becoming caught up in thoughts or feelings, simply note that attention has drifted, and then gently bring the attention back to your breathing.

Thoughts will enter your awareness, and your attention will follow them. No matter how many times this happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing. The more you can practice this exercise the more it will help you to manage symptoms.

## **Distraction**

If you take your mind off your symptoms, you will find that the symptoms often disappear. Try to look around you. Study things in detail: music playing, conversations etc. Again, you need to distract yourself for at least three minutes before symptoms will begin to reduce.



## **Anger**

It may be worth talking over your feelings of anger with those around you. Perhaps you could tell a prison officer, nurse, Listener or Samaritan that you think you can trust. Explain that your anger is not really directed at people around you even though at times it may seem that it is being taken out on them. Let them know that the anger is because of what you have been through. Ask for their patience until the anger and irritability pass, ask people not to take it personally. Exercise, such as going to the gym can help you deal with anger and stop you taking it out on others. The Chaplaincy can also offer help.

## **4. Overcoming avoidance**

Avoidance following a traumatic experience can take many forms. It can involve avoiding talking about the trauma, avoiding becoming upset about the trauma, it can also be that you avoid anything, anyone or any situation that reminds you of the trauma. This avoidance prevents you from moving on from the trauma and in some cases it can prevent you getting on with your life in a normal way.

**Try to recognise the things you are avoiding, it may help to write them down:**

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Set yourself very small goals to tackle these fears. We call this an anxiety ladder. Those situations that we only fear a little are at the bottom and our worst feared situations are at the top.

**It may help to look at this example:**

Shortly before coming into prison, Mick was in a car crash where his friend who was driving was killed. Mick now avoids talking about life outside because he feels anxious that he will not be able to cope if anyone asks him about his friend. He avoids the television if he thinks anything about road accidents is likely to be shown. He has made the following anxiety ladder.

**Most feared**

5. Saying what happened to a group of people
4. Mentioning his friend's death to another person
3. Mentioning his friend's death to a more trusted person
2. Watching television, especially local news
1. Looking at local newspaper reports about car accidents

**Least feared**

**It may help to try and make your own anxiety ladder to tackle avoidance:**

**Most feared**

- 7. ....
- 6. ....
- 5. ....
- 4. ....
- 3. ....
- 2. ....
- 1. ....

**Least feared**

**Remember you may feel anxious at first, but if you are able to stay in the feared situation you will gradually begin to feel calmer.**

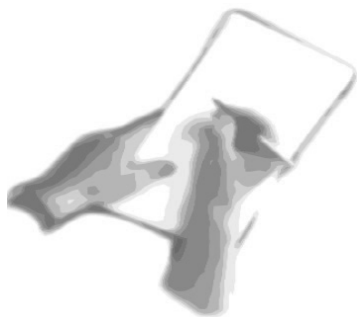
## **5. Overcoming low mood**

People often experience low mood following trauma. This can sometimes give rise to feelings of low self worth, reduced confidence, helplessness and guilt. It is sometimes hard to recognise when your mood is low.

It is important not to let any gloomy or negative thoughts go unchallenged. Following trauma, people tend to think and expect the worst of themselves, their life and the future. Don't just accept these thoughts. Try to:

- Identify when your mood is very low.
- Jot down the unpleasant thoughts you are having during that time.
- Try and counter these thoughts by writing down arguments against them. Imagine what you would say to friends if they had such negative thoughts about themselves. This is particularly important if you are feeling guilt.

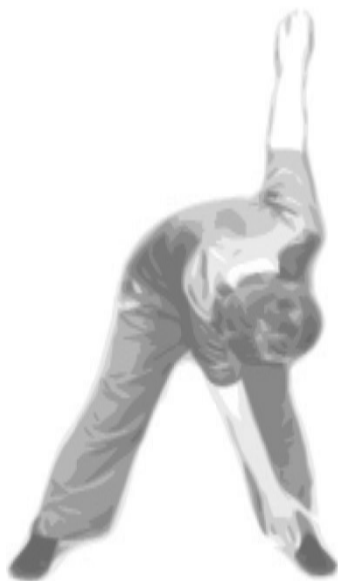
It may help to keep a diary of things you have enjoyed or achieved during the week. This can help you to concentrate on the good things rather than the bad things in your life.



### **Do something active**

Physical activity is particularly helpful. Walk, run, do sit-ups, press-ups, skip – anything that begins to increase your activity can help to improve how you feel. Plan 15-20 minutes of activity every day, or every other day to begin with. This activity is possible even in a confined space like a prison cell. Physical activity can actually begin to make you feel less tired and can lift your mood.

Find something that interests you and spend some time on it. Plan to focus on things you usually enjoy and build some time into each day for these activities. You might find it helpful to take up a new interest. Some people find that creative activities that help them to express their feelings such as painting, writing or playing music, can help them feel better.



## **Look after yourself**

Resist the temptation to cope with your low mood by drinking alcohol, misusing medication or turning to illegal drugs. These may give some immediate relief but quite soon create further health and psychological problems for you to cope with.

Try to eat well; choose the healthy option from the prison menu whenever possible. A good diet can help to keep you in good health so recovery is easier.

## **When should I ask for further help?**

We hope the suggestions made in this booklet have been helpful to you. Distress following trauma usually fades with time. However, if you feel that you are making little progress then other help may be available to aid you in overcoming your problems. Consider this in particular, if you feel you are no longer coping, or you have had any thoughts of harming yourself. It is also worth considering seeking further help if your feelings are not improving after some months.

## **Should I consider taking prescribed medication?**

NICE (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence) recommends that antidepressants should be considered for treating Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in adults. This would usually be prescribed by your doctor if talking therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) have not been found helpful or if you are very depressed.

## **Further help**

If you feel that you are making little progress, then other help is available to aid you in overcoming your problem. Discuss this with your case officer, someone in the Healthcare Centre, a Listener or Chaplain.



## **There are also booklets in this series on:**

- Depression and Low Mood
- Anxiety

These publications are available at

- [www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp](http://www.ntw.nhs.uk/pic/selfhelp)
- or telephone the Patient Information Centre 0191 223 2545

## **Useful organisations**

- Apex Charitable Trust

Tel: 01744 612 898

Unit 1, Ruskin Leisure Ltd, Ruskin Drive, St Helens,  
Merseyside, WA10 6RP

Aims to improve the employment prospects of ex-offenders and the long-term unemployed by providing services, training and advice.

- Combat Stress

Helpline: 0800 138 1619

The Chief Executive, Combat Stress, Tyrwhitt House,  
Oaklawn Road, Leatherhead, Surrey KT22 0BX

The UK's leading military charity specialising in the care of Veterans' mental health. We treat conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety disorders. Our services are free of charge to the Veteran.

- Creative and Supportive Trust

Tel: 0207 281 9928

Unit 1, Lysander Mews, Lysander Grove, Upper Holloway,  
London, N19 3QP

Provides education and training, welfare advice and support to women in prison, ex-offenders, women from drug and alcohol rehabilitation and from psychiatric units.

- Criminal Cases Review Commission

Tel: 0121 233 1473

5 St Philip's Place, Birmingham, B3 2PW

An independent body, set up under the Criminal Appeal Act 1995 to investigate the possible miscarriage of justice.

- MIND

Tel: 0300 123 3393

15 -19 Broadway, London, E15 4BQ

Working for a better life for people in mental distress, and campaigning for their rights.

Helpline available Mon - Fri, 9am - 6pm.

- NACRO

Helpline: 020 7840 1212

Park Place, 10-12 Lawn Lane, London, SW8 1UD

Offers resettlement information, housing projects and employment training before and after release.

- National Association of Citizens' Advice Bureaux

Contact your local office who can direct you to local groups who can help.

Head Office: Myddelton House, 115-123 Pentonville Road, London, N1 9LZ

Offers advice, information or advocacy on a wide range of issues.

- PACT – Prison Advice and Care Trust

Tel: 0161 702 1000

Park Place, 12 Lawn Lane, Vauxhall, London SW8 1UD

Provides a range of services to both prisoners and their families.

- Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Groups (POPS)

Tel: 0161 702 1000

1079 Rochdale Road, Blackley, Manchester, M9 8AJ

Offers advice, information and moral support to anyone who has a loved one in prison.

- Prison Fellowship (England & Wales)

Tel: 020 7799 2500

PO Box 68226, London, SW1P 9WR

Offers support to prisoners, families and ex-offenders.

Although based on a Christian ethos services are offered regardless of belief.

- Prison Phoenix Trust

Tel: 01865 512 521

PO Box 328, Oxford, OX2 7HF

Using meditation and yoga, the trust encourages prisoners to find personal freedom inside UK prisons by giving workshops and through correspondence.

- Prison Reform Trust

Tel: 020 7251 5070

15 Northburgh Street, London, EC1V 0JR

Campaigns for better conditions in prison and the greater use of alternatives to custody.

- Prisoners' Advice Service

Helpline: 0845 430 8923

Tel: 020 7253 3323

PO Box 46199, London, EC1M 4XA

Takes up prisoners' complaints about their treatment within the prison system.

- Samaritans (There should be a freephone available on your wing)

Tel: 0845 790 9090

Provides confidential, emotional support to anyone in need.

- Sexual Health Line  
Tel: 0800 567 123 (24hours)

- Stonham Housing Association  
Tel: 0845 155 1234  
Head Office: 2 Gosforth Park Way, Gosforth Business Park,  
Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE12 8ET  
Provides housing for ex-offenders, suitable for men and  
women of all ages.

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[www.survivorsmanchester.org.uk](http://www.survivorsmanchester.org.uk)  
[support@survivorsmanchester.org.uk](mailto:support@survivorsmanchester.org.uk)  
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