



## Resource Information

# Trauma – An Information Resource Pack

**This pack has been designed and produced in response to the outcome of a Needs Assessment exercise which was carried out in the NHSSB area in 2003 and the report produced in July 2004.**

Consultation took place with a range of health and social care professionals providing care and treatment for people whose life had been affected by the Troubles, and also people who themselves were victims and survivors of the violence in Northern Ireland over 35 years. One of the key issues that emerged from the consultation was the lack of information available.

Professionals needed information on the extent of the emotional, psychological and physical needs impacting on the lives of people who had experienced traumatic events directly or indirectly.

Victims and survivors of the Troubles wanted information on what help was available.

So the compilation of this Information Resource Pack and the Directory of Trauma Support Services serves to address both these needs.

I do hope you find the contents useful for your own particular needs and if you wish to make any comments on the contents please do not hesitate to contact me at the address below.

The Directory of Trauma Support Services is available by contacting the address below.

Thank You

**Sheelagh Sheerin**  
**Co-ordinator**

## Northern Area Trauma Advisory Panel

A multi-agency partnership  
chaired by the Northern Health  
and Social Services Board

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Resource Information

# What Is Trauma ?

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The word 'trauma' comes from the Greek term meaning 'to wound' or 'to puncture'.

**When a person experiences a trauma it means that they have been exposed to an event that has 'wounded' their emotional state and has caused them to experience a state of disquiet and stress.**

Experiencing trauma is part of everyday living and anything that disrupts normal events can serve to cause trauma to the person.

For example, some people experience trauma at the thought of going to the dentist which is a normal part of daily living but in some cases, this may be a traumatic event and the person may experience some of the symptoms associated with traumatic stress conditions which can include fear and anxiety, feeling unsafe, having disturbed sleep, and easily agitated.

People who have been exposed to, or have directly experienced traumas such as road accidents, acute physical injury or illness or been the victim of some of the incidents associated with the conflict ('The Troubles') in Northern Ireland will suffer some, or all of the symptoms described above. These are natural reactions and will in most cases, be resolved through time and become a 'bad memory'. But for many people, the trauma remains with them and rather than becoming a 'bad memory' the experience continuously impacts on normal living and activity and can develop into a condition called 'PTSD' or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. This condition requires professional help to resolve the situation and restore the person to wellbeing

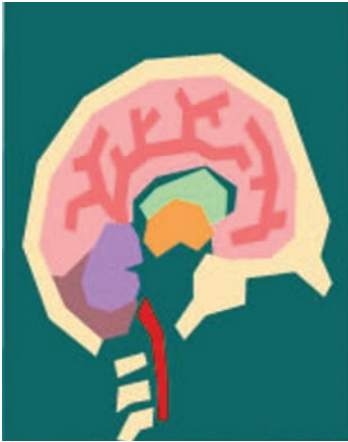
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**What Creates Traumatic Stress****2**

When we receive sensory information it passes through an emotional filter in the right half of the brain. If there is nothing emotionally charged, information is processed, passed to the left side of the brain and stored in the memory.

However, when information is emotionally charged e.g. when we experience a trauma, the information gets stuck in the Central Nervous System (located in the right side of the brain) and does not get processed in the normal way.

So, when we remember the trauma, the information that is stuck in the memory is triggered and the brain feels emotionally that the trauma is happening all over again, at the present time.

And this is how we have recurring flashbacks to the traumatic event, intrusive thoughts (sometimes violent) at unexpected times, nightmares and panic attacks.

People sometimes talk about feeling 'numb'. They experience a sensation that makes them feel paralysed both physically and emotionally. The emotional numbness can sometimes result in the person not being able to show emotions in the normal way.

**It is important to note that not everyone who suffers a traumatic experience will go on to have Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

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# What is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

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Shock

Mistrust

Disbelief

Isolation

Despair

Depression

Guilt

Ill Health

Anger

Relationship Problems



**Post Traumatic Stress Disorder** (commonly referred to as PTSD) is an emotional reaction to a deeply shocking and distressing or disturbing experience.

It is a psychobiological reaction (which means it can affect the mind, the emotions and the body). PTSD can result in a complex range of symptomatic reactions which persist over time.

## The Domino Effect

Trauma experiences trigger a complex range of emotions and feelings which have a 'knock on' or domino effect with each other



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# Trauma and The Affects on Family and Children

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**Families are also affected by the traumatic experience of one or more members and often they report having some or all of the following difficulties:**

- **Feeling overwhelmed and hyper-sensitive to stress**
- **Experiencing relationship difficulties**
- **Poor communication between family members**
- **Family members feeling isolated**
- **Inability to talk about the effects of the trauma on the family**

Traumatic events can sometimes change the way the family was prior to the event. Each member of the family should be allowed to deal with the effects of the trauma in their own way.

Everyone will be struggling to understand why the trauma happened and equally, each will be trying to offer support to other family members.

Young children in particular will need to be reassured that they are safe because young children will be less able to understand or accept the impact of the event. Older children and young adults will often feel a great sense of anger and revenge and sometimes detached or isolated. All children will need the support of family to help them deal with their feelings. It is important to seek professional help if the family/parent(s) feel unable to cope.

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**Medication and Treatments Explained****5**

In many cases, people who experience a trauma may need the help of a prescribed medication from their GP.

The tablets prescribed by the GP are often given to help the person get over the impact of the trauma. Sleeping tablets and anti-depressants are the most commonly prescribed medications. It is important to remember that medication only helps with the effects of trauma but does not help the trauma itself – sometimes when the effects persist over time the person may need professional help in the form of counselling or therapy to help resolve the trauma

Prescribed medication is available to help improve the symptoms of PTSD and stress related conditions: The general class of medications include:

Name	Class of Medication	Effects
PROZAC	SSRIs (Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors)	Adjusts mood
DIAZEPAM	Benzodiazepine	Help anxiety/Panic Attacks
TEMAZEPAM	Benzodiazepine	Aids Sleep
PROTHIADEN	Tricyclic	Sedative/Anti-depressant

Management of these drugs is critical. Some prescribed medications can have negative side effects and this needs monitored by medical professionals for toleration levels

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# Therapies and Counselling

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People need psychological therapy and counselling for a number of reasons. There are a number of therapeutic approaches and counselling services available for the range of diverse problems. In relation to trauma, the two therapies listed below have an evidence base that shows they are effective in treating traumatic stress and are recommended by government bodies that have studied trauma treatments. Counselling may not cure traumatic stress but it gives people the chance to talk through their problems within a supportive setting. If you need counselling or therapy services, it is very important that the therapist/counsellor is a professionally trained person.

### Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

CBT therapy is recommended by the CREST (Clinical Resource Efficiency Support Team) Guidelines in Northern Ireland, and NICE (National Institute of Clinical Excellence) guidelines for the United Kingdom, as effective in treating PTSD in adults and children. The therapy involves the person being guided through looking at their thoughts and behaviour before, during, and after, the trauma and recognising the effect of the experience on their life. The therapist will then help the person re-orient and organise their thoughts to make changes to their behaviour which will help with recovery.

### EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing)

This is another CREST and NICE recommended therapy, supporting the use of EMDR with adults suffering from PTSD. The therapy focuses on using eye movements to stimulate the part of the brain that has “locked in” the memory of the trauma. EMDR therapists will take the person through the mental images, negative beliefs and physical sensations that represent the trauma and help the sufferer reprocess that “locked in” information thus beginning the healing process and resolving the traumatic stress.

There are a range of complementary therapies available such as aromatherapy, yoga and Indian Head Massage. All of these can be of immense value to people who have experienced trauma. These therapies can work well with conventional medical and clinical treatments but it is important to check the details of any therapeutic care beforehand to make sure that it will not have any negative effects

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# Frequently Asked Questions About Trauma

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**Q. How do I know the difference between traumatic stress reaction and just a bad memory?**

**A.** Trauma is a natural occurrence of every day life and we remember things that happen, but when the experience persistently impacts on normal functioning then the indication is that the memory has held on to the experience and not processed it in the normal way. When this occurs, every time the person thinks about the trauma, they are re-experiencing the event as if it was happening right here and right now. The result is that the person is being re-traumatised every time they think about the original disturbing event that caused the trauma.

**Q. Who will be able to assess whether I have PTSD or not?**

**A.** Sometimes GPs are not always able to assess whether a person has PTSD and will refer patients to mental health services. There are a number of specialist professionals working within mental health services in the statutory sector and in the voluntary and private sector. Assessment for PTSD should always be carried out by an appropriate professional who is suitably qualified to undertake the assessment.

**Q. What Help is available?**

**A.** The most important thing to do is to talk things over with your GP in the first instance. Your GP may prescribe some medication to help deal with the symptoms of PTSD or Post Traumatic Stress Reaction e.g if you are unable to sleep or are feeling over anxious. If the symptoms persist you can seek advice from your GP or contact one of the private or voluntary agencies who provide therapies for PTSD. But again, the advice is to make sure that the therapist is suitably qualified to provide treatment and care. The Northern Area Trauma Advisory Panel has published a Trauma Support Services Directory which offers details of organisations and agencies within its area who can offer help.

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