

# What the?



Australian Centre for  
**Posttraumatic**  
**Mental Health**

**Trauma, Stress & Teenagers**  
Understanding Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

“

When I close my eyes, all I can see is the car coming towards us. Now, Mum and I have massive fights every night because she wants me to go to bed, but why would I want to lie there for hours watching the accident happen over and over again in my mind?”

“

Last summer everyone was going down to the lake for the day, but I just couldn't go. I don't know, it was too hot, or too windy, or something... It just reminded me of the day of the fires and I had to stay home. All my mates thought I was nuts.”

# What

# is a traumatic event?

A traumatic event is when someone experiences or sees something that is overwhelming and terrifying. They might have seen someone die, or thought that they, or someone they love, was going to die. They may have had really intense feelings of fear, helplessness, horror or hopelessness.

The trauma could be something that happened once, or something that keeps on happening over and over again, for weeks, months, or even years.

## Examples of traumatic events

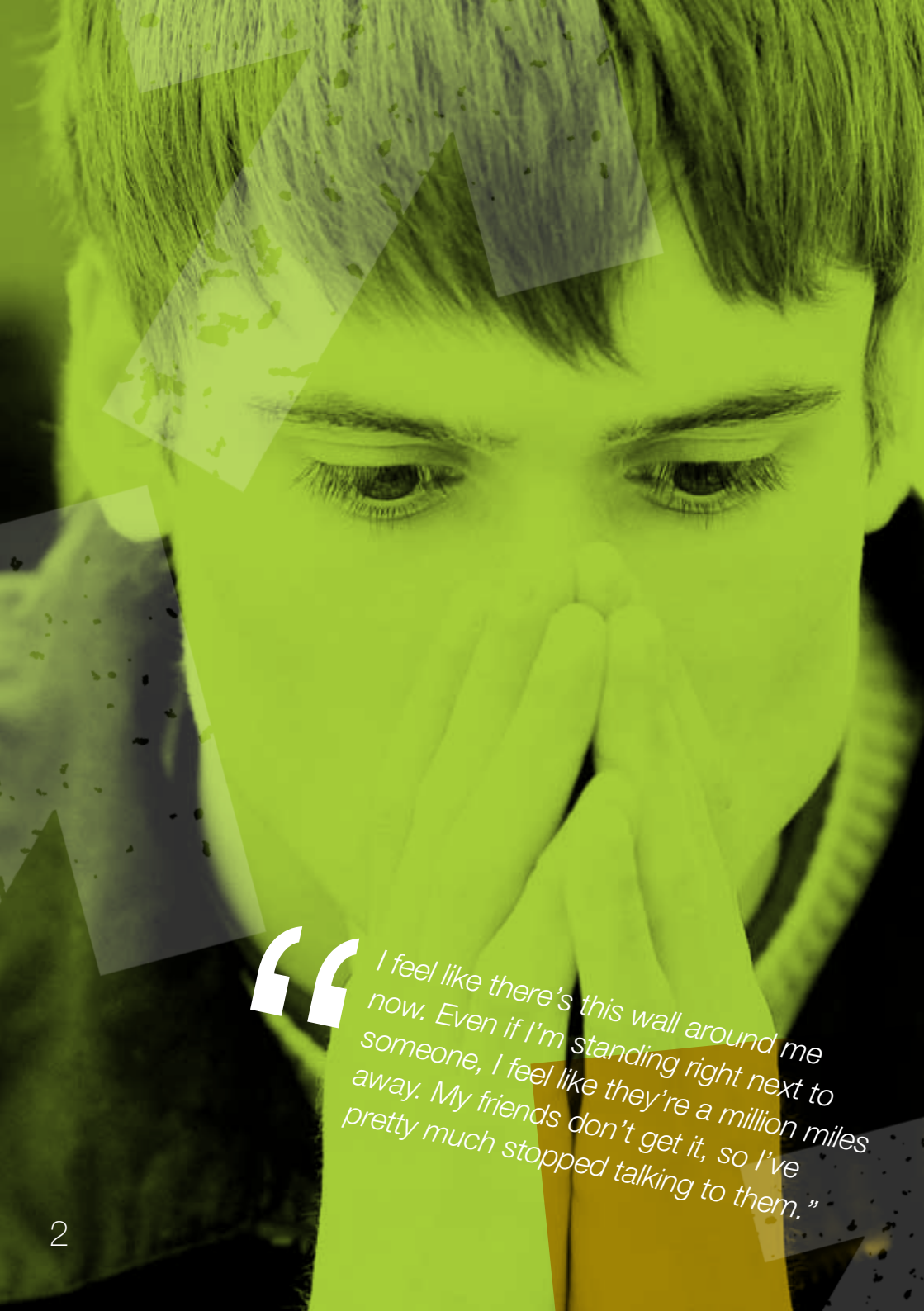
Seeing or experiencing:

**Natural disaster**  
(e.g., fire, flood, cyclone),

**Serious accident**  
(e.g., car, bike, fall from a height),

**Assault or seriously violent incident**  
(e.g., domestic violence, sexual or physical abuse),

**War**



*“ I feel like there’s this wall around me now. Even if I’m standing right next to someone, I feel like they’re a million miles away. My friends don’t get it, so I’ve pretty much stopped talking to them.”*

# What happens after trauma?

No two people react in the same way.


## You might:

- feel angry, sad, afraid or confused
- get headaches or tummy upsets
- have nightmares and trouble sleeping
- get into fights or do things that you wouldn't normally do
- be unable to concentrate, and have trouble doing school work
- not want to talk to or be around others

**Many people recover in a few weeks on their own, or with the help of friends and family.**

**Some people might have these reactions for a long time.**

It is important to get help as early as possible if you're still feeling bad after a month.



“ Since the assault I can't handle people talking about violence at all. If people start talking about it I just leave the room, even if it's during class. My teachers aren't happy about that, but I seriously can't help it.”

“ I was really scared. I felt like I was going insane! I was too embarrassed to tell anyone how I was really feeling; I didn't want people to know how crazy I was.”

# What

# is PTSD?

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a set of reactions that can develop in some people after they have been through a traumatic event.

## There are 4 main types of problems that you may experience if you have PTSD.

### Re-living the event

- Having upsetting memories of the event (e.g., through nightmares, or even feeling as if the event is actually happening again)
- Feeling really upset and scared when reminded of the trauma

### Avoiding reminders

- Avoiding people, places or situations that remind you of the trauma
- Avoiding ever talking about the trauma
- Using drugs or alcohol to stop the memories

### Feeling wound up

- Being unable to concentrate
- Having problems sleeping
- Feeling always on edge
- Self-harming
- Taking risks (more than usual)

### Having negative thoughts and feelings

- Being constantly irritable, anxious, afraid, angry, guilty or ashamed, numb or flat
- Having little interest in usual activities
- Feeling cut off from friends and family

# Getting help.

PTSD is really just like an alarm going off in your head telling you that the trauma you experienced is too much for your brain to handle, and you need some help to make sense of it all so you don't feel so overloaded.

**It's a bit like never tidying your room.** As time goes by, the floor, the furniture, and eventually even your bed, get covered in junk; you can't even recognise them anymore and you don't want to spend time in your room. So you have to make time to sort through all the junk, decide what to throw away and what to keep, and find a safe place to put the things that you don't want to get rid of. Once you have done this your room becomes a nice place to be again: somewhere where you can feel safe, hang out and sleep soundly.

**If you have PTSD, going to see a counsellor is just like cleaning up your room.**

A counsellor can help you sort through the 'junk' (memories, feelings and thoughts) that you have collected about the trauma, so that you can feel safe and secure again, and be free to do the things you used to like doing.

If you think that you might have PTSD, it is important to know that you are not going crazy.



## Who can help me?

**There are lots of people who you can get help from.**

However, at first you should speak to your parents, a teacher or another trusted adult about what's going on. They can then help you to find the right person to see.

**This might include:**

- a doctor
- a psychiatrist
- a counsellor/therapist (e.g., school counsellor, psychologist, social worker)

## What works best?

If you see a counsellor, you will be offered what is known as 'talking therapy'. There are different types of talking therapies, but for PTSD the one that works best is trauma-focussed cognitive behavioural therapy (TF-CBT).

**TF-CBT helps you to talk about your memories, thoughts and feelings and learn ways to manage them.**



*I've been seeing my psychologist for about a month now. I hated it to start with, but now I kind of look forward to going. I'd never talk to anyone else about this stuff, but getting it out of my head and saying it out loud always makes me feel better."*

## How do I get help?

**Step 1:**

Tell your mum, dad, teacher or a trusted adult about what is going on (take this brochure with you to help you explain it to them).

**Step 2:**

Make an appointment with your doctor (it is best to take your parents or a trusted adult with you). Tell him or her about what you're going through. The doctor will discuss things that you can do to feel better, and perhaps arrange for you to see a specialist counsellor.

**Step 3:**

Make an appointment to see the counsellor.



# Things I can do to help myself.

Choose a few of the things from this page that you would like to do, and try them out.

## Things I can do to feel better

1. Talk about my problem with a friend or trusted adult
2. Hang-out with my friends
3. Listen to my favourite music
4. Ask a trusted adult or a friend for a hug
5. Do some exercise with a friend or family member (running, dancing to music, riding my bike, going for a walk)
6. Make something by drawing, painting, sewing, knitting or cooking
7. Have a warm bath
8. Do a quick relaxation exercise
9. Write in my diary
10. Use positive self-talk

## Positive self-talk

Sometimes the thoughts in our heads make us feel happy, but sometimes they can make us feel sad, angry, worried or stressed. Positive self-talk helps to chase these unhelpful thoughts away so we can feel less stressed. If you are thinking about something horrible that happened, or are worried that something awful might happen, try using positive self-talk to make you feel better.

***I am safe now.***

***I was strong to survive that.***

***I have people who can help me.***

***I have done a lot of things well before - I'm sure I can again!***

## Quick relaxation exercises

### Calm breathing

1. Sit in a chair or lie on the floor
2. Take a breath in through your nose and count to 3 and imagine a soothing colour
3. Breathe out through your mouth and say the word 'calm' to yourself
4. Repeat this 10 times

### Imagine a happy place

1. Imagine a calm and happy place
2. Tell yourself what you can see, hear, smell and feel in this happy place
3. Practise your calm breathing whilst you are picturing your happy place

### Quick muscle relaxation

1. Hold your arms above your head – feel the tension in them – now drop your arms down by your side and feel them relax
2. Practise tensing and then relaxing muscles in your hands, legs, face, and stomach, and wherever else you feel stress

*“I’ve learnt a lot about how the way I think and the way I feel are connected. Like, I’d been thinking a lot since the fires about how I’d never be safe again, and I felt really anxious. But now I’m getting better at telling myself that the fires are over, and even if something like that does happen again, we’ll be ready for it this time. It makes me feel much stronger.”*

# Where can I find more information?

## Where can I find more information and start getting help?

### **Your doctor can be a good starting point when seeking help.**

He or she can help confirm what is going wrong and refer you to the right organisations and practitioners.

### **For immediate assistance call Lifeline on 13 11 14**

for confidential 24-hour counselling and referrals.

### **Useful information and resources are also available through the following organisations.**

#### **Trauma and posttraumatic mental health**

The Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (ACPMH) provides information and useful resources about posttraumatic mental health, for practitioners and people directly affected, at [www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au).

#### **Alcohol and other drugs**

The Australian Drug Information Network (ADIN) gives comprehensive information and a list of resources available across Australia at [www.adin.com.au](http://www.adin.com.au). The Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia (ADCA) can provide you with the number of an information service in your state or territory at [www.adca.org.au](http://www.adca.org.au).

#### **Asylum seekers, refugees and migrants who have experienced torture and trauma**

The Forum of Australian Services for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (FASSTT) has a list of agencies that provide support, advocacy and treatment at [www.fasstt.org.au](http://www.fasstt.org.au).

#### **Carers**

Carers Australia offers information, resources and access to support groups at [www.carersaustralia.com.au](http://www.carersaustralia.com.au) or call 1800 242 636.

#### **Children and young people**

Kids Helpline offers web-based, email, or telephone counselling for children and young people aged 5 to 25 years. Call 1800 55 1800 or visit [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au).

Information on a range of mental health and related issues that affect teenagers and young adults is available from ReachOut at [au.reachout.com](http://au.reachout.com).

Information on trauma and mental health, where to get help, and online support is available from headspace, the National Youth Mental Health Foundation. Visit [www.headspace.org.au](http://www.headspace.org.au).

### **Children of parents with a mental illness**

The COPMI resource centre provides information, resources and access to services at [www.copmi.net.au](http://www.copmi.net.au).

### **Depression and anxiety**

Several organisations offer access to information, resources and services, including beyondblue at [www.beyondblue.org](http://www.beyondblue.org) and the Clinical Research Unit for Anxiety and Depression at [www.crufad.org](http://www.crufad.org).

### **Disasters**

The Red Cross has information, advice, and resources for kids, teenagers, teachers, and parents. Visit [aftertheemergency.redcross.org.au](http://aftertheemergency.redcross.org.au).

### **Domestic violence and sexual abuse**

The Domestic Violence & Incest Resource Centre is a statewide Victorian service that can provide the name and contact details of agencies and support groups throughout Australia at [www.dvrcv.org.au](http://www.dvrcv.org.au).

### **Immigrant women's domestic violence services**

There are several services in each state and territory. See [www.iwdvs.org.au](http://www.iwdvs.org.au) or [www.speakout.org.au](http://www.speakout.org.au) for a list of services throughout Australia.

### **Parents**

Parentline provides telephone counselling to parents and carers of children aged 0 to 18 years. Visit [www.parentline.com.au](http://www.parentline.com.au) or call 13 22 89.

Information on how to talk to children and teenagers about their problems and where to find help, as well as online and telephone support, is available through headspace at [www.headspace.org.au/parents-and-carers](http://www.headspace.org.au/parents-and-carers).

### **Psychologists**

The Australian Psychological Society has a register of psychologists and lists their speciality at [www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au) or call 1800 333 497.

### **Sexual assault**

The Australian Centre for the Study of Sexual Assault has a list of the main sexual assault services in Australia at [www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/crisis](http://www.aifs.gov.au/acssa/crisis). All states and territories have crisis lines listed in the front page of the White Pages.

### **Veterans and their families**

The Department of Veterans' Affairs can provide information and referral advice at [www.dva.gov.au](http://www.dva.gov.au) or on 1800 555 254. The Department can provide the phone number of the Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service in your state and territory.

### **Victims of crime**

A list of victim support hotlines in each state and territory, as well as information about other relevant services throughout Australia, is available at [www.victimsupport.org.au](http://www.victimsupport.org.au).

### **Vocational rehabilitation**

[www.crsaustralia.gov.au](http://www.crsaustralia.gov.au)



This guide is a companion document to the *Australian Guidelines for the Treatment of Acute Stress Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*. The Guidelines were approved by the National Health and Medical Research Council, July 2013.

The complete Guidelines, a brief summary booklet, and resources for people affected by acute stress disorder or posttraumatic stress disorder, are available online: [www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au)

Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (2013).  
*What the? – Trauma, Stress & Teenagers*  
– *Understanding Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*.

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ISBN Print: 978-0-9923138-3-8 ISBN Online: 978-0-9923138-4-5

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Australian Centre for  
**Posttraumatic  
Mental Health**

# Promoting recovery after trauma

For more information,  
trauma resources and getting help  
[www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au](http://www.acpmh.unimelb.edu.au)



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MELBOURNE