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## Information Sheet

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# CDH and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

**Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a set of responses that can develop in people who have been through or witnessed a traumatic event. Traumatic events are events that threatened the life and safety of a person or others around them, and these events lead to feelings of intense fear, helplessness or horror.**

*“I really feel I need to see someone, as it’s really starting to hit me hard, what we both had to go through.”*

*Krystal, mum of Alyeena*

### Signs and symptoms

People with PTSD often experience extreme negative feelings, which may resemble the sensations that were felt during the traumatic event. A person with PTSD has four main types of difficulties:

#### 1) Re-living the traumatic event

Unwanted and recurring memories, often in the form of vivid images and nightmares. There may be intense emotional or physical reactions such as sweating, heart palpitations or panic when reminded of the event.

#### 2) Being overly alert or wound up

Sleeping difficulties, irritability, lack of concentration, becoming easily startled and constantly being on the lookout for signs of danger.

#### 3) Avoiding reminders of the event

Deliberately avoiding activities, places, people, thoughts or feelings associated with the event because they bring back painful memories.

#### 4) Feeling emotionally numb

Losing interest in day-to-day activities, feeling cut off and detached from friends and family, or feeling emotionally flat and numb.

A health professional may diagnose PTSD if a person has a number of symptoms in each of these areas over a period of time. The symptoms lead to significant distress and interfere with the person's ability to work or study, as well as his/her social relationships. If you are concerned about your mental health talk to your caregiver or GP.

It's not unusual for people with PTSD to experience other mental health conditions at the same time. These may have developed directly in response to the traumatic event or have followed the PTSD. These additional problems – most commonly depression, anxiety and alcohol or drug use – are more likely to occur if PTSD has persisted for a long time. Talk to your doctor or another health professional if you feel very distressed or your reactions are interfering with your relationships, work or study, and ability to participate in day-to-day activities.

## Real-life triggers

Parents of children with CDH have shared some of their experiences with triggers and flashbacks.

- Music: the music we listened to on the way to and from the hospital. Funeral songs. The songs we sang to our child.
- Machines beeping: hospital scenes on TV. People on oxygen.
- Smells: the smell of hand sanitiser, and the smell of hospitals. The equipment, the plastic smell, the clean smell.
- Hospital: the sight of the buildings themselves, and the procedures. Photos of children in hospitals. Children crying or in pain. Nurses in uniform.
- Sounds: early morning phone calls. Helicopters. Hearing an ambulance. The clank of medical instruments in the metal trays. Hearing suction being used. MET calls.
- Hearing or seeing breast pumps.
- Seeing certain people who remind us of those traumatic days.

## Treatment

*"I had counselling and it was very helpful in normalising my emotions and in naming what I was going through (PTSD). This helped me deal with it and know that I would get better with time."*

*Judy, mum of Harlee*

Many people experience some of the symptoms of PTSD in the first couple of weeks after a traumatic event, but most recover on their own or with the help of family and friends. For this reason, treatment does not usually start immediately.

Even though formal treatment may not commence, it is important during those first few days and weeks to get whatever help is needed. This might include simple information and advice on self-care. Support from family and friends is very important for most people.

## Do

- Spend time with people who care.
- Give yourself time.
- Find out about the impact of trauma and what to expect.
- Try to keep a routine going.
- Return to normal activities.
- Talk about how you feel or what happened when you're ready.
- Spend time doing things that help you relax.
- Spend time doing things you enjoy.

## Don't

- Use alcohol or drugs to try to cope.
- Keep yourself busy and work too much.
- Engage in stressful family or work situations.
- Withdraw from family and friends.
- Stop yourself from doing things that you enjoy.
- Avoid talking about what happened.
- Take risks.

## Anniversaries

*“The CDH journey is such a roller coaster and quite unique to a lot of other types of loss.”*

*Lara, mum of Jackson*

Anniversaries of traumatic events may trigger some unpleasant emotions in people, even if they were not directly affected or involved. You may also find other times difficult, especially when you are experiencing other stress in your life (e.g., financial, work, health or relationship problems). At these times, it is especially important that you look after yourself.

## Tips to help you cope with anniversaries and other difficult times

- Recognise that an anniversary can be a difficult period. Give yourself permission to feel some distress; it is perfectly normal and understandable.
- Keep your normal routine going, but allow yourself some time out if you need it.
- Plan your days and build in plenty of relaxing and enjoyable activities.
- Spend time with other people – especially those you care about – and don't be afraid to ask for support if you need it.
- Look after yourself. Get plenty of rest and exercise and eat sensibly; cut back on stimulants such as tea, coffee, chocolate, cola and cigarettes.
- If you drink alcohol, keep an eye on how much you drink.
- Try to relax. Listen to soothing music, go for a walk, take a hot bath, or do whatever works for you.

## Helping someone recover from PTSD

*“Having people around me I trust, and who really listen, has been so important. It's really helped me to process everything that we have been through as a family.”*

*Courtney, mum of Lucy*

People with PTSD can often seem disinterested or distant as they try not to think or feel in order to block out painful memories. This may make you feel shut out. They may stop participating in family life, ignore your offers of help or be more irritable than usual. It is important to remember that this behavior is part of the problem and is not about you. The person with PTSD probably needs your support but doesn't know what to ask for.

## There are many ways you can help:

- Encourage them to seek professional help. Your GP is a great place to start. The GP is equipped to do a primary assessment and get them on the track to recovery.
- Listen and show you care. Sometimes it's hard to know the right thing to say, and things that are meant to be helpful can instead leave the person feeling isolated and misunderstood. Examples of such statements are "You just need to get on with your life" and "I know how you feel".
- You can encourage them to share their thoughts and feelings about what is happening to them. Remember that you are not, and should not try to be, their therapist, and you don't have to find answers. Listen and be there.
- Some people find it helpful to have time to themselves. This can be beneficial, but encourage them to balance the time they spend alone with time spent with others.
- Encourage them to remain focussed on recovery from PTSD. There will be times when they seem to make great strides towards recovery, and other times when nothing seems to be happening. It's important that you help them to focus on getting better in terms of PTSD and comment on positive changes or small steps. Also, while recovery from PTSD is possible, the grief will remain – don't expect a person to 'recover' from their grief.
- Look after yourself. This could be the most important thing you can do to help them. It is crucial that you take time out and reach out to friends and other supportive people in your community.

## Resources

**Please talk to your doctor or healthcare provider if you are concerned about yourself, or someone close to you.**

**You can find additional resources at <http://cdh.org.au/support-links>**



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**Phone:** 1800 149 562

**Website:** [www.cdh.org.au](http://www.cdh.org.au)

