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What therapies can treat PTSD?

Around 15 million adults experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) each year. Once believed to be incurable, there is now a range of therapies that can help to manage and treat PTSD.

"Just over a decade ago, people still thought that PTSD was an incurable condition, but more recent evidence and research proves it is possible for PTSD and complex PTSD (C-PTSD) to be successfully treated many years after the traumatic event occurred. This means it is never too late to seek help," says Jacqui Suttie, CEO and founder of [PTSD UK](#).

"Traumatic events can be very difficult to come to terms with, but seeking professional help is often the only way of effectively treating PTSD and C-PTSD."

What is PTSD?

[Post-traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD) is a mental health condition caused by experiencing a traumatic event. PTSD was first identified in war veterans and has previously gone by different names, such as 'shell shock'.

Today, PTSD is recognised as a condition that can happen to anyone who has experienced any traumatic event. The situations that we find traumatic can vary from person to person, but a traumatic event is defined by its "capacity to provoke fear, helplessness, or horror in response to the threat of injury or death", as explained by [PTSD UK](#).

There are numerous events that could trigger PTSD. Examples include life-threatening accidents like car crashes, [sexual abuse](#), violent assaults, a traumatic childbirth, or seeing someone die in particularly upsetting circumstances.

It is **estimated** that 50% of people will experience a traumatic event at some point in their lives. For most people, the impact of the trauma on **mental health** can heal with time. Around 20% of these people will go on to develop post-traumatic stress disorder. These people have long-lasting **symptoms** that require treatment. This can include flashbacks, ongoing emotional distress and physical symptoms.

Types of PTSD

There are different forms of PTSD recognised by healthcare professionals. They include:

- Delayed-onset PTSD – people who experience the onset of symptoms more than six months after the trauma.
- Complex PTSD – people who experience trauma at an early age, or have long-lasting trauma.
- Birth trauma – people who experience a traumatic childbirth.
- Secondary trauma – people who experience some symptoms while supporting someone close to them who has experienced trauma.

What are the therapy options for PTSD?

According to Suttie, the first step before exploring therapeutic options to treat PTSD may be 'watchful waiting'. This is **recommended** for those who have had PTSD symptoms for less than four weeks, or if their symptoms are relatively mild. Watchful waiting involves self-monitoring your symptoms to see if they improve.

If PTSD symptoms persist, a healthcare professional will advise you of the different therapies available. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) **recommends** trauma-focused psychological treatments such as **cognitive behavioural therapy** (CBT) and eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR).

"Many people also find holistic non-pharmacological therapies such as **yoga, meditation**, music therapy, acupuncture and hypnotherapy incredibly effective at helping to manage their symptoms," comments Suttie.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a form of **talking therapy** that aims to coach the mind into certain ways of thinking. The therapy will give people the tools to manage and change their thoughts in a way that helps them deal with their trauma. NICE recommends that people with PTSD have 8-12 sessions lasting between 60-90 minutes each.

Eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR)

Eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) is another trauma-focused psychological therapy. It can reduce PTSD symptoms by desensitising the thoughts that people have about the traumatic event. A therapist will do this by asking the patient to think about aspects of the event, and then asking them to follow the movement of their fingers. The rhythmic eye movements are intended to create a similar effect to the way the brain processes memories while you sleep.

Other talking therapies and counselling

There are also other forms of talking therapies to treat PTSD. These include **counselling** and group therapy sessions. Dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) is a specially adapted talking therapy based on CBT, for people who feel emotions very intensively.

Hypnotherapy

While there is no solid evidence that hypnotherapy can be effective at treating post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD UK advises that some people living with PTSD have found it beneficial. It should not replace the therapy options advised by your GP, but may be considered alongside better researched treatment.

The goal of hypnotherapy is to unlock stored emotion and to explore the traumatic event from a different perspective.

Art therapies

PTSD UK and **Mind UK** both recommend art therapies, such as music therapy, as an additional way to treat PTSD. Again, this should not replace the treatment plan advised by your GP. More research is needed into the benefits of art therapies for people with PTSD. This said, there is **research** to suggest that art therapy may help people to address painful experiences of trauma.

Art therapy may be useful for people who find it difficult to put thoughts and emotions into words. It involves creative activities within therapy sessions.

Other therapeutic activities and self-care tips

There are also therapeutic activities that people can try in their spare time. Although they warrant further study, [research](#) suggests that yoga and meditation can help to ease PTSD symptoms.

PTSD UK has also produced useful information on [how writing can be a personal form of therapy that can help people with PTSD](#). Likewise, implementing a [running routine](#) has been shown to reduce the symptoms of PTSD. It is thought that this is because running increases the levels of a protein called brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDN). This protein helps the brain adapt to stressors.

Positive lifestyle changes like these can make a big improvement in PTSD symptoms. Mind UK also provides a helpful [self-care guide](#) that can help people cope with flashbacks.

Medication for PTSD

It is worth noting that while therapy is the primary way to treat PTSD, sometimes medication may also be used to ease PTSD symptoms. Although people experiencing PTSD aren't routinely prescribed medication, some are if they are also experiencing [depression](#) or are having [sleep problems](#) caused by PTSD. Typically, the medication prescribed will be an [antidepressant](#), which has been found to help with PTSD.

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