

# Trauma toll rises at a distance

How do people manage to resume their ordinary lives after a trauma like the Bali bombing or a major car accident?

While they may be striving to get back to a surface normality there can be other forces at work.

The early stage very much resembles the first few weeks after a funeral. The flowers have died and people have got on with their lives.

But the bereaved are left with enormous grief and having to cope with a profound loss that is still very immediate...an immediacy that may be felt for several months, even years.

This is the time when post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may creep up on a person. PTSD is a range of thoughts and feelings that may include intrusive recollections of the traumatic event and an exaggerated psychological sensitivity to events around them.

It may also involve a determination to forget the memories by becoming numb and distant from the original trauma.

PTSD can emerge when you are trying to do something normal, like get back to work, when suddenly the memory of the trauma overwhelms you. Or it might show up as a combination of sleeplessness, hypersensitivity to danger, suicidal thoughts or getting angry with people whom you normally tolerate.

According to U.S. expert Aphrodite Matsakis, the wide range of PTSD symptoms fall into three categories: psychological, physical and social.

The psychological symptoms include sleep disturbances (nightmares), flashbacks, anxiety, a tendency to react under stress (with survival mechanisms such as aggression, emotional numbness, suicidal thoughts, fantasies of retaliation); hyper-alertness and fear of trauma returning.

Physical symptoms include sleep disturbances (insomnia), restless sleep, night sweats, hyper-ventilation and panic attacks.

The social group of symptoms includes feelings of alienation and problems with intimate relationships, cynicism and distrust of authority figures and public institutions, hypersensitivity to injustice, tendency to alternate between rage and passivity, over-protectiveness and fear of losing others and social isolation or emotional distance from others.

People with PTSD often appear to be going on with their lives, but it's like a rip in the surf: it might look calm on top, but there's turbulence underneath.

Or they may be those whose feelings are more to the surface and who feel their lives are completely out of control.

Like those suffering from grief, those with PTSD need people around them who can give them room to express their feelings.

They also need people who can feed back to them how their behaviour appears to others, especially if the sufferer is getting angry about things that would never have worried them in the past. The role of the support person is to give them a gentle reality check, even though you run the risk of having your head bitten off.

Individuals suffering from PTSD are in the process of learning to live with the impact of the trauma without letting it rule their lives.

If the symptoms of PTSD are debilitating, then chat to your GP or seek out a counsellor.

Counselling can help by providing a safe space in which to explore all the different feelings associated with the trauma.

Some people worry that counselling will make it worse, but the nature of counselling helps the person assess and understand their feelings in a contained and safe environment.

## Survival tips

- **Be aware of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder**
- **Allow time for people to heal, and offer gentle support**
- **If PTSD seems to be ruling a sufferer's life, encourage them to talk to their GP or seek out a professional counsellor trained in PTSD work.**