

# Living with trauma



**IMPORTANT NOTICE: This information sheet does not constitute medical advice or guidance. Its purpose is to give general information about how we work at Beira's Place and how we deliver our service to survivors. Beira's Place is not a medical service and cannot diagnose physical or mental health conditions.**

**If you have been hurt or injured and think you need immediate medical treatment, call 999, or call NHS 24 on 111 for physical or mental health advice.**

## ● What is trauma?

Trauma is the result of a person being overwhelmed by events that are happening to them, and where that person experiences intense feelings of fear, helplessness, and powerlessness. The trauma survivor may feel that they will be killed or seriously injured. It can be described as an injury that hurts a person emotionally, psychologically, and physiologically and can result in severe traumatic stress overwhelming their capacity to cope.

*"Fear is at the core of trauma. Fear is at the core of PTSD symptoms. It's important to understand what fear is and the brain processes it. When something terrifying happens, what happens to a person's brain? In fact, when we are talking about fear in the context of trauma, what we are actually talking about is terror."*

David Lisak; 'The Neurobiology of Terror'

Trauma is not 'just stress'. Many of us can respond appropriately to even very stressful situations and then return to a state of stability or homeostasis. However, if the situation is not just stressful but so overwhelming that a person is unable to cope with the feelings of helplessness, shame or terror experience, (for example in cases of complex trauma resulting from childhood sexual abuse or domestic abuse) and cannot re-establish a sense of safety, they may remain on 'high alert' continually responding to even the smallest incident that they may feel to be threatening. That person has become traumatised. Dr Bessel van der Kolk says:

*"Trauma is not the story of something that has happened back then, it's the current imprint of that pain and fear living inside people."*

The traumatic event is that which threatens the life or safety of an individual, or someone close to them. Traumatic events can be short lived or one off, or there can be chronic trauma which is the experience of recurring events over a prolonged time.

Chronic or complex trauma can have an impact on a trauma survivor's ability to form relationships and as well as being the result of directly experiencing violence it can also be caused by witnessing violence. Children growing up with neglect, physical violence, sexual abuse, and/or domestic abuse can have a wide range of trauma symptoms that can have an impact on their emotional or psychological development and have a long-term impact on physical health and wellbeing.

Toxic stress is the result of repeated exposure to traumatic events – domestic abuse, childhood sexual abuse, commercial sexual exploitation – where the survivor's body's stress response system gets 'stuck' and stability, or homeostasis, can never be achieved.

Anyone who experiences toxic stress can come to see almost all situations as danger or a threat: this can have an impact on their view of the world and make building relationships and trust difficult.

*“The developmental stage at which an individual is traumatised has a major impact on the degree to which mind and brain are affected. In addition, more and more research has accumulated that for both children and women, trauma inflicted by intimates, parents, and partners has the most profound long-term consequences.*

*“Traumatisation within attachment relationships has profoundly different impacts on affect regulation, self concept, and management of interpersonal relationships than do disasters and motor vehicle accidents.”*

Traumatic Stress: The effects of overwhelming experience on mind, body, and society  
Bessel van der Kolk, Alexander C McFarlane and Lars Weisaeth Eds.

Depression is another common symptom among trauma survivors. The World Health Organisation<sup>1</sup> links depressive disorders to adverse life experiences including traumatic events. In the late 1990s, WHO predicted that depression would “have the highest burden of disease by the year 2020” and by 2022 their figures showed that:

- Globally, it is estimated that 5% of adults suffer from depression
- Depression is the leading cause of disability worldwide and is a major contributor to the overall global burden of disease
- More women are affected by depression than men
- **There is effective treatment for mild, moderate, and even severe depression**

With support from medical professionals and access to appropriate counselling and support services, trauma survivors who are living with depression can improve how they feel and take back control of their lives. Support is available in a safe and confidential space for women across the Lothians, at Beira's Place.

<sup>1</sup> Depression ([who.int](http://who.int))