

# ARE YOU EXPERIENCING COMPLEX PTSD SYMPTOMS?

## INFORMATION FOR SUFFERERS

By Bedfordshire community organisation – Recovery Code X



Survivor led

For the people

By the people



**FIND OUT.** You may be suffering from Complex PTSD and not realise it. Physical, emotional and mental experiences of trauma can affect your well being many years after the events. Understanding how to access help and what you can do will give you a pathway to recovery.

Experiencing uncertainty and disruption has been part of the Covid pandemic. Before Covid many people had been living with the residues from old traumas. With the pandemic, normal coping mechanisms may have been disrupted, generating new layers of panic, fear and anxiety.

You've got this!



## What is Complex PTSD?

**Complex PTSD (Post-traumatic Stress Disorder)** is a normal response to prolonged, repeated interpersonal trauma or abuse and neglect in childhood that is experienced as life-threatening or horrific from which escape is difficult or impossible.

Judith Herman (1992) noticed that survivors had a 'spectrum of conditions' in common that 'disorganise the personality'. The symptoms are more complex than those seen in survivors of a single event or short-lived traumatic events - PTSD. Other causes of Complex PTSD are domestic violence, being a victim of human trafficking, combat, living in a war zone, being a prisoner of war, slavery and torture.

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## How to spot the symptoms

A Complex PTSD diagnosis includes the three widely accepted symptoms of PTSD, categorised here in points 1, 2 and 3.

There are also other symptoms, such as: difficulty controlling emotions, negative self-talk, feeling disconnected from yourself and the world (dissociation), relationship problems, self-isolating, destructive or risky behaviour and suicidal thoughts. Read on to see which (if any) sound familiar.

### 1. Constant sense of threat

Nowhere feels safe. Your body is tense, you get panicky easily. You're hyper alert to danger signals as if something awful could happen at any moment. It's hard to talk about these feelings for fear of being humiliated, shamed. It's exhausting.

Fear becomes hard-wired in the brain's neural networks if your parents or carers were emotionally unavailable, hostile to your infant needs and verbally, physically or sexually abusive. Repeated victimisation in adulthood creates more damage to the nervous system.



### 2. Intrusive feelings and flashbacks

Strong emotions can lie dormant until an external trigger happens and suddenly emotional flashbacks surface and staying calm and relaxed is a huge challenge or impossible. Certain places, thoughts and images trigger unresolved trauma from the past.

Intense feelings of danger, helplessness and hopelessness are a throwback to an original event. The memory of the traumatic event may be forgotten or be fragmented. These strong intrusive feelings can keep replaying in your present day life and it can become more difficult to feel present.



### 3. Avoiding reminders

You tend to consciously and unconsciously avoid things, people and places, that remind you or trigger your past traumatic memories. This has a huge effect on your life, as avoidance strategies can diminish interaction with others, social life and career opportunities.

Often survivors minimise or deny past traumatic events, repress their feelings about what happened, try to ignore the pain, become numb and dissociate (switch off or tune out). They may not be aware that they are doing this.



### 5. People hurt you

You tend to avoid people and feel that others cannot be trusted and are likely to turn on you. Tragically, survivors of child abuse are more likely to experience self-injury and repeated victimisation, relationships with abusive people, sexual harassment, and rape (Judith Herman MD 1992).

Dissociation means danger signals get ignored and learned helplessness keeps survivors repeating abusive relationships.

### 4. Unhealthy coping mechanisms

You try to manage your experiences using a variety of strategies: over or under-eating, using alcohol, illegal drugs, self-harming, becoming involved in risky behaviour or promiscuity. You can find any interruption to your work or routines intolerable as you try to keep yourself distracted.

### 6. Intimacy & sexuality

You find it difficult interacting with someone intimately and feel numb or disconnected from your feelings when others try to get close to you. You may have issues with being touched yet long for love and care.

You lack awareness of boundaries and so people take advantage. You have learned to suppress and ignore your feelings since childhood to avoid rejection, and abuse may have caused you to shut down completely.

### 7. Negative self-talk

Your traumatic memories created a powerful inner critic within you. These negative internal thoughts can range from simmering self-hatred about being ugly to feeling stupid and unworthy - confirmation of why people have treated you so badly.



Getting through the day feels exhausting and you wish you could escape life altogether. You want a different life but haven't got a clue what to do and this makes you feel hopeless.

### 8. Health problems

When you are experiencing continued chronic stress on all levels: physically, emotionally and mentally, the immune system becomes negatively suppressed. Scientific studies show this can lead to inflammation in the body and a variety of physical health problems.

This factsheet is also available in audio as a podcast on our website. See: [www.recoverycodex.org/factsheets](http://www.recoverycodex.org/factsheets)

## Steps Towards Recovery

Your experiences are unique to you, but there are some steps that everyone can take towards recovery.

1. Make contact with your GP to access local services and/or local and national support organisations.
2. Establish a basic safety framework and self-care routine.
3. Find a trauma therapist to help you process the past traumatic events.
4. Join a support group online or face-to-face.
5. Find a nutritionist to understand how super foods and healthy nutrition can support your immune system.
6. Explore and enhance healthy coping strategies.
7. Explore holistic methods such as relaxation, breath work, mindfulness, yoga and tai chi.
8. Spend time in nature, enjoying what you see, hear, feel, smell.
9. Keep a journal to be able to see progress.
10. Be kind, compassionate and patient with yourself. Life is a journey not a destination.



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This factsheet has been created thanks to funding from the National Lottery Awards for All.

