

CLOSE TO HOME



# DEALING WITH PTSD



## Finding courage

**K**arla was a happy, lighthearted child with many friends. Her parents taught her to believe in God, and she and her family were active in their local congregation. Karla was ten when her father started coming into her bedroom, where he sexually abused her. He covered her mouth so she couldn't cry out. He would talk about God to her even as he was abusing her, and afterwards he demanded that she forgive him. He said that if she told anyone she was not showing forgiveness, and that God would not be able to forgive her sins.

There were immediate dramatic changes in Karla's behavior. Her grades began to slip, she stopped seeing her friends, and people noticed that she was very grumpy. No one asked her what was happening in her life.

Now an adult with a family, Karla divides her life into periods: before the abuse, and the period after. After the abuse she felt numb and dead inside. She couldn't feel anything, and sometimes she poked herself with pins or cut herself so that she could feel something. She wanted to sleep all the time, but she often had nightmares and woke up screaming.

Karla had a hard time going to church because whenever people talked about God as Father it made her almost physically sick. She couldn't pray the Lord's Prayer or even sing many of the songs, so she felt she did not belong in church. She also felt ashamed, almost as if people could look at her and know the shameful things her father had done to her.

As a survivor of abuse, Karla has had a hard time finding healing. She describes herself as feeling shattered, broken, and bruised to the core. She knows people are frightened by the angry outbursts she sometimes has. She also has tried to commit suicide several times.

The suicide attempts put Karla in contact with a psychiatrist who heard her story. The doctor prescribed medication for anxiety and depression, and put Karla in touch with a group for survivors of abuse who have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Karla learned she was not alone; other people who have experienced trauma have similar symptoms. She learned to recognize signs of stress and developed strategies to lower the tension in her body.

Karla found the courage to tell her pastor her story. The pastor offered to help her plan a ceremony of healing involving some of her close friends who knew her story. The ceremony included reclaiming the Scripture passages her father had misused.

Karla's congregation is supportive, providing meals and child care when her PTSD symptoms make it impossible for her to function. Her pastor encourages her to keep getting professional treatment so healing can continue.

Karla is not sure whether she will ever feel normal again, but she hopes to be well enough to use her experience to help others who have suffered childhood abuse.

## The problem of PTSD

**W**itnessing or experiencing a horrifying event in which your own well-being, or that of another, is threatened can result in traumatic stress. Traumatic stress may happen because of

- **intentional human actions** such as sexual or physical abuse, torture, kidnapping, terrorism, assault, death threats, witnessing violence, or even committing violence against another in self-defense;
- **unintentional human actions**, including accidents or disasters such as fires, explosions, vehicle accidents, or nuclear accidents; or
- **natural disasters caused by earthquakes**, floods and tsunamis, drought and famine, avalanches, tornados, attack by an animal, or even a life-threatening illness such as a heart attack or cancer.

Symptoms of traumatic stress may include

- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Intrusive memories
- Emotional numbness
- Loss of interest in activities
- Feeling detached and different from others
- Occasional rapid heart rate
- Difficulty sleeping
- Inability to concentrate
- Feeling jumpy and startling easily
- Hyper-vigilance
- Problems with explosive anger
- Overwhelming guilt for having survived.

Most people who experience traumatic stress regain their physical and emotional equilibrium within a few weeks. Post-traumatic stress disorder is usually the diagnosis when symptoms persist for more than a month after the traumatic event and become intrusive, affecting social relationships and work. However, sometimes symptoms do not emerge until years after the event. It is important to note that most people with PTSD experience some of the symptoms, but no one experiences all of them.

PTSD is something that simply happens; anyone can develop it, and people do not choose to get it. Lack of social support, stressful events, previous trauma, and a social environment that produces shame, guilt, or self-hatred are all factors that may indicate a risk for developing PTSD.

In general, traumas caused intentionally by humans are the most difficult to recover from because they often cause deep loss of trust and damage the ability to form future healthy relationships. Traumas caused by acts of nature are the least complex and typically are the easiest to recover from.

### Our internal alarm system

When danger is sensed, the *amygdala*, an almond-shaped structure in your brain, acts as your alarm system. It floods your body with hormones, putting you in a state of hyper-arousal so you can fight the danger or flee from it. Your heart rate and respiration increase, and blood rushes to your muscles and to produce extra strength. Your sight and hearing sharpen. After danger is gone, most bodies and brains return to a state of calm equilibrium. In PTSD, the brain keeps producing stress hormones and acting as though the danger persists long after it is gone.

## PTSD, the Bible, and the Christian story

When trauma changes the landscape of life into a wasteland, and when there is no hope for the future, God can seem far away or even non-existent. The heart cries out, “Where were you? Where are you?” Such questions are frequently found in Scripture.

David the psalmist experienced numerous traumas. On one occasion, his patron and friend, King Saul, suddenly turned and threw a spear at him, attempting to kill him. Later Saul hunted David with an entire army. Many of the psalms reflect anguish and despair. For example, we read in Psalm 77:2-4, “In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. I think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints. You keep my eyelids from closing; I am so troubled that I cannot speak.”

The people of Israel experienced trauma as a group when they were invaded by Babylon. After a brutal and bloody war, their temple was destroyed; Jerusalem (Zion) was demolished; and the Israelites were forced on a long march into exile. A psalmist recalled,

By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat  
down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there we hung up our harps.  
For there our captors asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”  
How could we sing the Lord’s song in a  
foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4).

Life had changed drastically for the people of Israel; they were beaten, bruised and utterly defeated. They were also desperately angry: “Happy shall they be who take [our enemy’s] little ones and dash them against the rock!” (Psalm 137:9).

The search for meaning in the face of trauma exists throughout Scripture. The writers remember God’s faithfulness in the past, even though God seems far away in the present. Babylon, a place of exile and death, eventually became a place where the people again embraced life. The prophet Jeremiah was chosen to give a message to the people in exile: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).

Before Babylon, Israel already had a history of trauma. They had been enslaved in Egypt, forced into hard labor. This horrifying and humiliating period of their history was not forgotten. They remember their deliverance, and found meaning in the hard years. They constantly recalled how they had been aliens in a land, vulnerable and attacked, and this knowledge permeated their culture: “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (Deuteronomy 10:19).

The witness of Scripture suggests that God can walk with you through your deepest trauma. God can absorb your cries of despair and even doubt. God can help you find a way out of trauma and into life again. The road isn’t easy or fast, but generations of faithful followers have walked it.

## Steps toward healing

**M**any people deny they have PTSD and try to cope with symptoms on their own. They may deny how bad things are so that they can move on. They may try to numb the pain with drugs or alcohol. Or, they are too terrified to even think about the past.

It doesn't help when people tell PTSD sufferers, "Get on with your life!" or "Stop dwelling in the past." They may blame the person for depression, anxiety or inability to work. In turn, the one with PTSD may blame himself or herself.

The most basic requirement for healing is finding a safe place. Symptoms of PTSD cannot be treated if you are in a situation where the trauma is still happening (for example, if you are being emotionally or physically abused by your partner). Another basic requirement is seeking outside help. Trauma changes the way brains work. Brains are very complex; the interrelationship between biological, social, psychological, and spiritual factors means that it is very hard to recover on your own.

A therapist can provide a safe and comfortable environment where you can talk about your symptoms and receive a diagnosis. Once diagnosed, your therapist can use a variety of therapy approaches.

Seeing a medical doctor or psychiatrist is essential to know if medication can help control anxiety or depression levels. Drugs are a beginning step towards changing patterns that have been established in the brain by traumatic events.

Treatment usually focuses on managing symptoms, because they won't go away overnight. Learning ways to identify stress in the body is a common component of PTSD treatment. This may include deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation, visualization

## Addressing the problem

The term post-traumatic stress disorder was coined in the 1970s, largely as a result of the work counselors were doing with Vietnam veterans. In the First and Second World Wars, soldiers were described as having "battle fatigue" or "shell shock." Because tens of thousands of soldiers are returning today from Iraq and Afghanistan with PTSD, the medical community is investing considerable resources in further research.

of calming scenes, meditation and/or prayer. Those with PTSD can become very skilled at managing the symptoms and live good, healthy lives.

Cognitive-behavior therapy may be part of your treatment. This therapy can help you learn to recognize and manage things that trigger reoccurrence of PTSD symptoms of the trauma incident. It may also help challenge and change beliefs that lead to distress. Your therapist can give information on what approach might be helpful to you.

The goal of all PTSD therapies is to help you learn to see your trauma as an event in your past and to integrate it into your overall life journey. Then you will be able to live in the present and not be haunted and controlled by the past.

You may have found that trauma has shaken your core beliefs about God and the world. Your church community and pastor can probably help you to make sense of the traumatic event and find meaning in it. In community, you may find that your pain uniquely equips you to help others as they walk a similar journey. Engaging with others in meaningful ways will help you find a "future with hope."

## For Further Awareness

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### Websites

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs,  
National Center for PTSD  
[www.ptsd.va.gov](http://www.ptsd.va.gov)

PubMed Health  
[www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0001923](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmedhealth/PMH0001923)

Gift From Within  
[www.giftfromwithin.org](http://www.giftfromwithin.org)

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