



South West London and
St George's Mental Health
NHS Trust

TRAUMATIC STRESS SERVICE
SPRINGFIELD UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL

Living with a parent or guardian with PTSD



This leaflet is probably in your hands right now because your Mum, Dad, or guardian has been through a very upsetting or frightening experience (known as a trauma) and as a result is living with the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Watching a parent suffer in this way can be confusing, distressing and sometimes even frightening for you too. You may feel lost as to how to help and support them while they receive treatment for these problems. You may also want to talk to someone about how you feel.

What is PTSD?

When something terrifying happens, it can come as a big emotional shock and it is normal to be upset, even for quite a while afterwards. Some people continue to feel scared, even though the danger has now gone away. Often this gets better over time. But for some people things stay the same or even get worse and it can seem like they are scared or angry all the time.

Things just seem stuck. Being stuck in this traumatic memory is what happens when you have PTSD.

What can I do to help?



If you are reading this, it is likely that your parent is getting help from our service or is waiting to have help. You might also want to help your parent too. You can help by reminding Mum, Dad, or your guardian that they are safe, the danger has passed and that it is normal to have these kinds of memories whilst they are still recovering.

Your mum, dad or guardian may not want to talk about their traumatic experience with you. It may also upset you to hear about what they went through, and it's okay to ask your parent not to talk about it with you if it's too distressing for you.

What might PTSD look like?

Flashbacks and memories

Flashbacks are common after a trauma. Flashbacks are very strong memories where it seems like the event is happening again. Memories of the event seem to come out of the blue and can feel overwhelming and terrifying. Sometimes the memory can be so strong that your mum / dad may not realise that they are at home and safe. They might stop responding to you, as if they cannot hear you.

Sleep problems

Sleep problems are very common after a trauma. These can include difficulties getting to sleep, waking during the night, nightmares and cold sweats, and waking early in the morning.

What can I do to help?



If you live in the same house, these problems may wake you up too. If you can, reassure them that they are safe and encourage them to keep a normal bedtime routine. If you think your mum / dad / guardian is having a flashback, you could say their name loudly or ask them to tell you about some of the objects that they can see around them in the room that you are both in. This will help to bring them out of a flashback. Also, make sure you are getting enough rest too!

Fear and anxiety

After a traumatic event, the world seems like a much more frightening place. Your Mum/Dad/guardian may try to overprotect you and others. They may, for example, phone you often or ask you to take special care when you go out. They may be jumpy and jittery, especially when reminded of what happened. This may be frustrating or even frightening for you.

What can I do to help?



You can help by gently reminding them that the traumatic event is in the past and they are safe now. It might help to get the support of another adult who can help to reassure your parent when they are feeling scared.

Anger

Anger is a common reaction to trauma. Your Mum/Dad/guardian may be angrier in general, and snappier and more irritable with those they love the most, including you. Make sure you remind yourself that it is not really you they are angry at; it is the thought of the event that causes them distress.

Feeling sad and low

Feeling sad and low is common after a trauma, especially when someone passed away or was injured in the event. It is normal to feel low when we lose something, and many people feel they have lost the person they used to be. Your parent or guardian may be very tearful or may even talk about hurting themselves or not wanting to be here anymore. This can be very upsetting and frightening for you, but with treatment things will improve.

What can I do to help?



You can help by encouraging them to be active and to do the things they used to enjoy or be interested in, little by little. You could even suggest doing some things together that you used to enjoy doing.

Loss of interest

Loss of interest is linked to feeling sad and low. Your parent/guardian may not seem to want to be in your company or to join you in the hobbies that you shared before the trauma. They may not want to play with you anymore. It's important to remember that this is caused by the trauma.

Seeming distant or unloving

It is normal to have difficulty experiencing positive emotions when constantly flooded by fear and anxiety from a terrifying experience. **Your parent/guardian may feel like they don't deserve your affection, so may come across unloving or distant.** They may need space at times, and this does not reflect anything that you have said or done. This may be confusing and upsetting for you, but it is important to remember they still love you very much, they just can't feel warm or happy emotions right now.

What can I do to help?



You can help by reassuring them that you are there for them and you still care about them. PTSD might make it difficult for you to get your needs met, but your needs are also important. You may want to talk to someone about how you are feeling.

How is PTSD treated?

Your Mum/Dad/guardian will be receiving a special treatment for PTSD. The therapy they receive will be helpful for the kind of problems described above. The treatment has two main strands:

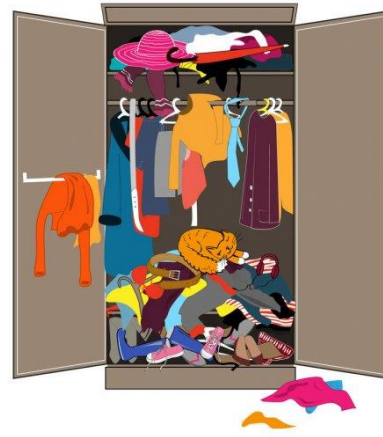
1. **Sorting through the memory:** talking about the traumatic experience and working through the negative thoughts and feelings about the trauma.

Memories in PTSD are a bit like cleaning out your wardrobe or cupboard. Your wardrobe might be very messy and whenever you brush into it, items fall out - this is like when reminders of the trauma are triggered in PTSD and your parent/guardian might have a flashback and feel afraid. Your natural reaction may be to shove the items back in and quickly shut the door, but this only keeps the problem going. The wardrobe becomes

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jam-packed with memories and they fall out at the lightest brush against it. Treatment for PTSD helps clean out the wardrobe or cupboard by slowly taking things out, looking at them carefully, folding them neatly, and putting them back in their proper place.

2. **Reclaiming life:** this means helping them get back to the activities and life that they had before the trauma occurred. With good progress, memories of the trauma are put back into their proper place in the wardrobe; you can always find them if you want to, but they won't fall back out into the open so much when you don't want them to. This means that flashbacks and nightmares become less frequent and the person is not so scared any more.



The treatment is likely to be tough for your Mum, Dad, or guardian because it involves talking about the things they want to forget about the most. **It's a bit like cleaning a wound; it stings whilst it is getting cleaned, but it heals better afterwards.** This means that things may not seem much better at first when they are having their treatment, but gradually they will get better.



What can I do to help?



You can help by supporting them throughout their therapy, reminding them that it takes real courage to face the things they are frightened of, and encouraging them to keep going. Your understanding throughout the process will be helpful to them.

They may want to tell you about their work in therapy or need your help to work through some important treatment tasks with them. You may even be asked to accompany them on some tasks. It is important to remember that even small tasks may be very hard for them. Remind them that they are doing their best, which is amazing.

What does all of this mean for me?

So, what will happen now? Will things go back to normal? Things may well go back to how they were before the trauma, but sometimes this isn't possible. On the other hand, sometimes **things can change in really positive ways!** Your parent/guardian will have learned and grown through trauma and tragedy, and this can shape the way they want to live in the future. That being said, supporting your parent/guardian with their difficulties can be very demanding. You may feel exhausted if you have been doing so for a long time. **It is important to make sure you are supported yourself and make time for relaxation and fun!**

You may even have your own difficulties to deal with if you experienced the same traumatic event as your parent/guardian. **If you recognise any of the symptoms mentioned above in yourself, you may want to visit your GP for help.** You may just want someone to talk to, to share your experiences with, or to get some advice from a professional. There are always people to talk to should you need to:

Further support

Below are some links and phone numbers you can refer to that provide you with more support, guidance, and information. There are also many apps you can download for free that help with relaxation and coping with stress. Always remember to reach out to friends or family you trust, and look after yourself with fun activities, relaxation, meditation, or whatever works for you!

Childline:**0800 1111**

Childline is both free and confidential. People under 19 can go there with anything on their mind, both via their hotline and message boards on their website.

<https://www.childline.org.uk/>

Samaritans:**116 123**

This service is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year for anyone who needs support.

<https://www.samaritans.org>

Youth Wellbeing Directory:

A list of services near your area for anyone up to the age of 25.

<https://www.annafreud.org/on-my-mind/youth-wellbeing/>

Take Time Out:

A list of tips by YoungMinds focused on managing stress and helping children and adolescents with relaxation techniques.

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/looking-after-yourself/take-time-out/>

The Mix provides essential mental health support for young people.

<https://www.themix.org.uk/mental-health>

NHS 111 service:**111 is the NHS non-emergency number.**

If you require urgent health or wellbeing help for yourself or your family member or are in an emergency, you (or you can ask your parent/guardian) can call the NHS 111 service. You will get quick and easy access to advice from a person highly trained to help you, supported by healthcare professionals.

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You can also call 999 in a major emergency where your or your parent's life is being threatened or at risk, or you or your parent is seriously ill/injured.

Thank you caring for your parent/guardian, they would be proud of you.

& thank you for reading, we hope that this has been helpful.