What is PTSD?

What post-traumatic stress disorder is, why it lasts and how it is treated.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can develop after an event involving serious threat to you or someone else: an accident, an assault, abuse, a sudden death, a traumatic birth or medical event, war, disaster. It is diagnosed when certain reactions last longer than a month and get in the way of life.

The four groups of symptoms

Re-experiencing
Flashbacks, nightmares and intrusive memories that feel as if the event is happening now, with the same fear and body reactions.

Avoidance
Staying away from reminders, and trying not to think or talk about it.

Changes in mood and beliefs
Guilt, shame, numbness, feeling cut off. "It was my fault." "Nowhere is safe." "I am damaged."

Being on high alert
Easily startled, always watchful, irritable, poor sleep and concentration.

Why it lasts

- **The memory is unprocessed.** It is stored in fragments of sight, sound and sensation, without a clear "this is over" tag, so reminders set it off as if it were now.
- **Avoidance stops processing.** Pushing the memory away prevents the mind from filing it as past.
- **The meaning sticks.** Beliefs such as "I should have done something" keep the sense of threat or shame alive.

Treatment

The treatments with the best evidence are trauma-focused: trauma-focused cognitive behavioural therapy and EMDR (eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing). Both help you revisit the memory safely so it can be stored as something that happened in the past, and both look at what the event has come to mean to you.

This work is done at your pace. We start by building ways to stay steady, and you stay in charge throughout.

Outlook
PTSD can be treated. Most people who complete a trauma-focused therapy improve substantially, including people whose trauma happened many years ago.

My notes and questions

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