If there was a death during the incident, survivors often feel guilty that they lived when others didn’t. It is very important to understand that these feelings are normal and to get counselling as soon as possible.

**Effects of PTSD and related problems**

PTSD is negative for both the sufferer and his or her family.

**Substance abuse:** Many people suffering from PTSD try to get rid of painful memories, loneliness and nervousness by using alcohol or other drugs as a form of self-medication. Substance abuse helps to take away feelings and memories for a little while.

**Depression:** Many PTSD sufferers can’t get over the grief and anger after the injury or loss, and this can cause depression as the person begins to see him or herself as worthless and a failure. The symptoms of depression – like not being able to think properly, the negative views of the world, and the changes in sleeping habits – all make PTSD worse.

**Suicide:** A person with PTSD may feel their pain will never end. People with PTSD can be at risk for suicide.

**Panic disorder:** Often people with PTSD suffer panic attacks, resulting from the extreme fear they felt during the traumatic event. During their attack; their throats tighten, while their breathing and heart rate increase, making them feel nauseous and dizzy. When they are exposed to places, smells, sounds, or people that remind them of the trauma, or when they have memories or flashbacks of the incident, they often have panic attacks.

**Panic attack:**
- Being very frightened and terrified
- Racing or pounding heartbeat
- Chest pains
- Dizziness, light-headedness
- Nausea (feeling like you want to vomit)
- Difficulty breathing
- Tingling in the hands and fingers
- Feeling very hot or feeling cold
- Fear of losing control, going "crazy" or mad, or doing something embarrassing
- Fear of dying

**Steps to recovery**
- Remember that the symptoms are part of the trauma – they will pass eventually.
- Feelings of guilt are normal – it’s part of taking back your life. Speak to a counsellor to help you cope with these feelings.
- Talk about your experience in detail - your thoughts, feelings and fears. Tell people you are close to that you want to talk about it.
- Take control of your life as soon as possible. Avoid going on leave, and don’t make any extreme life changes – it is best to face your fears and feelings rather than avoid them.
- Slowly get back to your normal habits. Do what you normally do - if you find this difficult, get the support of family and friends. It is important not to push yourself too hard, take things slowly.
- Understand this is a process – you will get better but it takes time.
- Your family and friends may also be struggling with what you’ve been through. Talk about it with them, and be there for each other.

**Depression:**
- Feeling sad, anxious, or "empty" mood
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities that were once enjoyed, including sex
- Trouble sleeping, or sleeping too much
- Eating too much or not eating
- No energy, feeling tired, being "slowed down"
- Thoughts of death or suicide; suicide attempts
- Restlessness, irritability
- Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions
- Physical symptoms like headaches, digestive disorders, and pain that don’t get better with treatment

**Counselling:** Trauma counselling is a good way of coping with the experience. You may go for individual appointments where you can talk through the experience and work through the painful feelings such as anger, sadness and guilt. You can find good ways of coping with the symptoms.

**Debriefing:** Is a type of counselling when a group of people who have been through a traumatic event together. It is a group meeting that allows each group member to talk about their feelings and reactions to the event.
If you are like many South Africans and have been the victim of violent crime, abuse, accidents, loss, or illness, you may be suffering from a very real illness – Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD.

Many victims of trauma in South Africa don’t get help because they feel embarrassed, they think that acting brave and tough is the ‘manly’ thing to do. They have seen so much violence that they feel ‘numb’, or they refuse to believe what happened.

What is trauma?

Experiences that are sudden or that we don’t expect like a car accident or robery, threaten our lives and our safety. We are also emotionally hurt – and we often feel helpless, scared, angry, and guilty.

Question: Only weak people who are unable to cope with traumatic events get PTSD. False - PTSD can affect anyone who has gone through trauma.

Question: Everybody has been through a frightening experience and must therefore be suffering from one or more symptoms of PTSD as a result. False - PTSD is different from normal anxiety.

Question: People have stress after a trauma, but this is not usually serious. False - With PTSD, many people get depression, anxiety, or abuse substances, and there may be problems at work and with friends and family.

Common feelings after a traumatic event

Most people feel certain things after a traumatic event. Normal symptoms and reactions include:

- Nightmares
- Sleeping difficulties
- Changes in appetite
- Anxiety and fear
- Irritable, agitated, or angry
- Very aware and ready to act

Avoidance symptoms:

If you are like many South Africans and have been through a traumatic event, or has even witnessed something traumatic, can be affected.

Causes of trauma

Anyone who has gone through a traumatic event, or has even witnessed something traumatic, can be affected.

There are many different events that can cause someone to react badly.

Causes of trauma

- Seeing a trauma
- Going through or seeing violence often
- Death of a loved one
- Accident – car, work, home
- Robbery
- High-jacking, smash & grab
- Natural disaster
- Work-related stress
- Unemployment
- Domestic violence
- Divorce, break up
- Having a terminal illness like cancer or AIDS
- Assault or abuse

Questions:

- PTSD can affect anyone who has been caught up in a traumatic event. True - PTSD can affect anyone who has been caught up in a traumatic event.
- PTSD is different from normal anxiety. False - PTSD is different from normal anxiety.
- Not all people who have been through a trauma will develop PTSD or need treatment; some get better with the help of family, friends or other support. True - Not all people who have been through a trauma will develop PTSD or need treatment; some get better with the help of family, friends or other support.

Children can also get PTSD. Domestic violence and abuse, loss of parents, war, and natural disasters impact on the lives of children.

Symptoms of PTSD

PTSD usually appears within three months of the trauma, but sometimes it may come on months or even years later. There are three groups of PTSD symptoms: intrusive symptoms, avoidance symptoms, and symptoms of hyper-arousal.

Intrusive symptoms: People suffering from PTSD may have times when the traumatic event ‘takes over’ their life when they have sudden, very realistic memories and painful emotions.

Avoidance symptoms: PTSD sufferers often stay away from situations that may remind them of the traumatic event. False - PTSD sufferers often stay away from situations that may remind them of the traumatic event.

Hyper-arousal symptoms: PTSD can cause sufferers to act like they are still threatened by the trauma that caused their illness. True - PTSD can cause sufferers to act like they are still threatened by the trauma that caused their illness.

Guilt: Trauma includes loss and many people can’t cope with the guilt that they caused the incident or that they should have somehow stopped the trauma from happening.