



DENTS IN THE SOUL

Dealing With Post Traumatic Stress Disorder



*"When your six year old daughter tells you
you're angry all the time, that's when
you need to pull your head in..."*



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INTRODUCTION

This DVD is the result of a need, identified by Army and supported by the Directorate of Mental Health, for information about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) to be made readily available for Defence members and their families.

PTSD, while referred to frequently in the general community and the media, remains often misunderstood by those potentially affected and their families. For example, individuals vary widely in their reactions to a Potentially Traumatizing Event (PTE), sometimes also called a Critical Incident (CI). The former are defined as “any threat, actual or perceived, to the life or physical safety of the individual, their loved ones or those around them”.

What will be very disturbing and potentially traumatising for one person may not be for another. As well, individuals who are regularly exposed to traumatic incidents, such as the Police and the Emergency Services (Medical staff, Fire Brigade, Ambulance Officers, SES volunteers) can experience no ill effects for many years but then suddenly react after even a relatively minor event.

Likewise, after a PTE, it is not uncommon for individuals to experience a range of symptoms (intrusive thoughts or memories, sleeplessness, avoidance of people or places that remind them of the event, and hyper-vigilance). This is a perfectly natural and normal reaction to an abnormal situation, and the mind and body’s way of making some sense of, and dealing with, what happened. While the symptoms can be very distressing and uncomfortable, generally, they will subside within 2 to 4 weeks after the event and the person affected will gradually resume their normal work, family and social activities. While the person will have memories and occasional reminders of what happened, and the experience may alter their view of life and their priorities, they are generally able to function effectively in their life and experience no major disability. In some instances, the people affected undergo considerable personal growth.

However, for a small percentage of people, these distressing symptoms do not subside and can intensify to the point that their normal

functioning at work and in their private lives is severely impaired, and they lose significant quality of life. Generally, these people will need specialised professional assistance to recover their normal functioning, but most will eventually go on to lead normal, productive and satisfying lives.

This DVD aims to de-stigmatise PTSD and to show that it can potentially happen to anyone who has been exposed to a traumatic event. Developing symptoms of post traumatic stress after exposure to trauma is not a sign of weakness – it is simply being human. It is that particular individual's response to that event or situation.

Likewise, being diagnosed with PTSD is not necessarily a "career ending" sentence. Discharge from service is always the last option. The diagnosis is only an indication that the individual concerned needs specialised assistance in dealing with the event. Recovery rates from PTSD are high but early diagnosis and treatment are particularly important. Generally, the longer the symptoms persist, and go untreated, the longer the eventual recovery will take and the greater the disruption to the person's work, family and enjoyment of life.



GUIDELINES FOR USE

The intention for the "Dents in the Soul" DVD is for it to be widely distributed throughout Army, at all levels, so that members and their families can have ready access to it.

The DVD can be viewed in both informal and formal situations, individually and in groups, and in military or civilian settings. It is also a resource for use by individual members and their families, as well as for Commanders at all levels and Mental Health Professionals.

If you are viewing this DVD by yourself, it is suggested that you view it several times. Initially, you should watch it all the way through, then think about the content and how it relates to your particular situation. Then, if necessary, go back and look at the DVD again, this time pausing, or replaying sections as required, to take onboard the various views expressed.

Any questions that are raised for you by viewing the DVD should be written down and then discussed with your local Mental Health Professional or Provider. This could be a Nurse, Chaplain, Psychologist, Social Worker, Psychiatrist or Medical Officer. You may even want to discuss the DVD, and your questions, first with your mates and your immediate Chain of Command. You, or your Chain of Command, can then contact your local Mental Health Professional, if need be, to arrange a time to discuss the DVD and your questions. There is a list of "Frequently Asked Questions" to assist you in Annex A of this booklet.

If you are the partner or a relative of a member, and viewing the DVD to gain a better understanding of some of the issues that your partner or family member may be dealing with, again it is suggested that you follow the above guidelines by watching the DVD from start to finish, write down any questions that you might have and then take some time to think about the messages in the DVD. Your partner or family member may or may not have wanted to watch the DVD with you initially, but if they didn't watch it with you, it may be an appropriate time to talk about the questions you have with them and to watch the DVD a second time together.

After this, both of you should discuss whether the information in the DVD is relevant to your particular situation. If so, you need to

consider whether you, or your partner or family member, need further information or assistance. Again, this can be facilitated by their Chain of Command or Mental Health Professional. Particularly for the partners and families of members, the Social Workers in the Defence Community Organisation or the Psychologists in the Veteran's and Veteran's Families Counselling Services can be a very useful source of information and support services.

If you are a Commanding Officer, and intend to show "Dents in the Soul" in the context of a "CO's Hour" to stimulate discussion on the topic of PTSD, there are a number of points to note to enhance the effectiveness of the messages contained within the DVD.

Firstly, watch the DVD yourself beforehand, so that you are familiar with the style of delivery and the messages presented. Then consider the overall aim you want to achieve by showing the DVD and what specific objectives you have for the target audience. These may be as simple as "raising awareness" of the issues or "mentally preparing" people likely to be exposed to trauma. You may also be trying to bring mental health concerns more to the fore, especially for members' families.

Consider your audience – how experienced are they in the military? What knowledge will they have about PTSD? How many may have already been exposed to significant trauma? How are they likely to react to the DVD?

Depending upon the numbers involved, the level of interaction anticipated and the venue available, it may be necessary to have several sessions so that the group size is not too large. Generally, the smaller the group the easier the interaction, so group sizes of between 30 and 50 would probably be ideal.

In introducing the DVD, you should cover the following points.

The DVD was produced specifically to:

- demystify PTSD and remove the stigma around PTSD in particular and mental health issues in general
- encourage members to speak out about their experiences and to seek assistance if necessary
- reassure members that a diagnosis of PTSD is not necessarily "career ending", and

- provide information to members and their families.

Consider enlisting the support of a Mental Health Professional or Provider (Chaplain, Psychologist, Medical Officer or Social Worker) to assist in the discussion afterwards and to answer questions.

After viewing the DVD, generate a discussion by asking a series of generalised and specific questions of the group, such as:

- What was your immediate reaction to the DVD?
- What was the main message that you got from the DVD?
- Who was able to relate to what the people in the DVD discussed? (show of hands) Why was that?
- How will the information contained in the DVD help you in particular?
- In what way could the DVD be of assistance to the families of members?

To facilitate an open discussion, disclose your own thoughts and feelings briefly to encourage others to speak out. Likewise, paraphrase what people say ("So what you're saying is...", "If I hear you right...", "Let me see if I understand..."), ask additional open-ended questions ("Tell me more about that:", "Why was that important?", "What impact did that have on you?"), and reflect the feelings or emotions expressed ("Sounds like you were deeply affected.", "I'm picking up that the support you got was very helpful to you.", "I can see how difficult that must have been for your family"). The aim is to create a safe and open environment where individual viewpoints are valued and respected, and people feel free to express their thoughts and feelings.

After 10 to 15 minutes, bring the discussion to a close by asking for any final comments. Thank the audience for their participation and express the view that you hope they found it interesting, informative and helpful. Repeat the contact details for your local area Mental Health Professionals and make any handouts that you have available as people leave (the fact sheets on PTSD, and other mental health issues, produced by DMH will be useful, particularly as they list additional resources and contact details).

An outline session plan is attached at Annex B.

Additional Resources and Contacts

Wounded Digger

www.army.gov.au/woundeddigger

Defence Community Organisation (DCO)

1300 333 362

www.defence.gov.au/dco

Veterans and Veterans Families Counselling Service (VVCS)

1800 011 046

www.dva.gov.au/health/vvcs

Department of Veterans Affairs (DVA)

13 32 54

www.dva.gov.au

Defence Families of Australia

www.dfa.org.au

Directorate of Mental Health

<http://intranet.defence.gov.au/vcdf/sites/DMHSF>

Joint Health Command

<http://intranet.defence.gov.au/vcdf/sites/JHC>

Australian Centre for Post Traumatic Mental Health (ACPMH)

(03) 9496 2922

acpmh-info@unimelb.edu.au

All Hours Support Line (ASL)

1800 628 036



Annex A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

1. "What is a traumatic event?"

What is "traumatic" for one person may not be so for another. However, it is generally accepted that certain events, like threat of death, serious injury, seeing dead bodies, death or serious injury of a close friend/colleague/family member or witnessing wide spread human degradation, have the potential to cause significant distress.

2. "What are the main symptoms of traumatic stress?"

Most people will normally experience strong reactions after traumatic events. Commonly, these include re-living the event, having intrusive thoughts about the event, avoiding anything that reminds them of the event, feeling sad and tearful, feeling highly anxious or panicky, sleep disturbances, being easily startled, extreme irritability, difficulties concentrating or remembering, excessive use of alcohol or drugs, and relationship problems.

3. "If I am experiencing symptoms of traumatic stress, when should I seek help?"

The initial symptoms of traumatic stress would be expected to subside after 2 to 4 weeks since the traumatic event. If the symptoms persist longer than this, you should seek professional help to manage the symptoms and to reduce their impact upon your ability to function.

4. "If I have symptoms of traumatic stress, will I automatically get PTSD?"

No. There is a continuum of how people react to PTEs or CIs, from mild disturbance to quite severe impact. Generally, the more severe the reaction, the more likely a person is to develop PTSD - however, if the symptoms diminish within a few weeks, it is less likely that the person will go on to develop PTSD.

5. "What is PTSD?"

PTSD or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a serious mental illness that can occur after exposure to a traumatic event. It is characterised by repeated and disturbing images or memories of the event, avoiding places or situations that remind people of the event and significant hyper-arousal including exaggerated startle responses and sleep problems.

6. "If I have PTSD, does this mean I'm going crazy?"

PTSD is a serious mental illness that will significantly impact upon a person's quality of life. It does not mean you are going to change to an entirely different person, or not be able to lead a quality life.

Annex B

Suggested Session Outline (55 mins)

Content	Timings
Welcome and introduction	2 mins
Playing of "Dents in the Soul" DVD	38 mins
Facilitated group discussion	10 mins
Summary and close	5 mins





Australian Government

Department of Defence

