

- Stress

## PTSD FEAR FOR COVID HOSPITAL PATIENTS

LOOKS AT THE KEY SIGNS OF POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER AFTER NEW RESEARCH REVEALS THE RISKS

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POST-TRAUMATIC stress disorder (PTSD) is a type of anxiety disorder that the NHS says is caused by “very stressful, frightening or distressing events”, and new research suggests Covid-19 patients admitted to hospital can suffer from it, particularly if they require a ventilator.



The research, published in the journal BJPsych Open from the Royal College of Psychiatrists, looked at 13,049 survivors in the UK who had suspected or confirmed coronavirus. The researchers found 35% of patients put on a ventilator experienced extensive PTSD symptoms alongside 18% of patients who were admitted to hospital without requiring a ventilator.

PTSD can occur in anyone, of any ethnicity, nationality or culture, and at any age. Psychologist, Emma Kenny (ekenny.co.uk) says covid patients can also suffer from post-intensive care syndrome (PICS), a type of trauma or collection of symptoms that can be experienced by patients who survive critical illness after they leave intensive care.

“When you’ve been critically ill, it can cause you to experience nightmares, unwanted images, reminders of your illness, depression and anxiety, that can also lead to PTSD,” says Emma.

“It’s partly caused by the sedation and ventilation, which can cause you to feel confused as you don’t remember the ins and outs of what happened.

“Understandably, a person might feel like they didn’t have control over their environment at the time.”

Emma explains that PTSD is something that typically occurs six to 12 months after a traumatic incident, whereas PICS can occur in hospital and continue when a patient is dis-

charged.

“Some people who were symptomatic with coronavirus and ended up on a ventilator may have had sepsis too, a blood infection which can cause delirium,” she continues. “Delirium is a little bit like psychosis, and it’s caused by the body’s reaction to infection.

“It can be incredibly terrifying, causing nightmarish thoughts and hallucinations that can trap people in a fear cycle.”

When discharged from hospital, Emma says a patient isn’t just dealing with the trauma of having to overcome an illness, they’re also dealing with the mental health response to losing control, not being able to piece together the reality of what happened versus the thoughts and feelings that were going on in the brain.

Mental health symptoms can range from patient to patient, but PICS can cause a patient to go on to develop PTSD.

**WHAT ARE THE KEY PTSD SYMPTOMS?**

PRIORY’S general adult psychiatrist Dr Paul McLaren (priorygroup.com) says PTSD can cause people to relive an experience through nightmares and even flashbacks.

“You might notice numbness and loss of deep feelings as a way to protect yourself, or difficulty concentrating as your mind is on other things and past traumatising situations,” he explains.

Dr McLaren adds: “Suffering painful emotions such as guilt, anger, anxiety, panic and depression is common, as well as avoidance of dealing with these emotions, specifically grief, anger and frustration.”

Emma says this can be a difficult emotional balancing act as people around you might say you’re ‘lucky’ to have survived coronavirus, especially when others are dying; all the while, you’re still battling ongoing emotional symptoms.

“Drinking too often and turning to drugs are often seen as ‘ways out’ of a problem but the reality is that these will only reduce the chances of recovery,” Dr McLaren continues.

“Plus, there’s physical sensations like headaches, dizziness and chest pain, along with irritability and difficulty sleeping.”

If PTSD is left untreated, Dr McLaren warns symptoms can become severe and long-lasting, which can subsequently affect your family, social and work life.

**WHAT TO DO IF YOU ARE SUFFERING FROM PTSD**

“I’D ALWAYS advise getting a referral for therapy,” says Emma. “There’s a waiting list at the moment and it will depend on your local hospital trust, as some will have specific programmes for PTSD and PICS, but you’ll need to be referred to a clinical psychologist.”

Emma says talking therapies like CBT and dialectical behaviour therapy (DBT) can be helpful, and there is also Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) psychotherapy that may be offered to you too.

“Speak to your general health practitioner to find out your options, as they know how the physical and mental are connected, and can assure you that the thoughts and symptoms you are experiencing are completely normal after a traumatic event,” says Emma.

“Normalising the symptoms can really help patients to start working on moving past them.

“It’s also really important for families and friends to keep an eye out for these symptoms too, as if they can see a person close to them slipping, they can steer them in the direction of the help they need.”

If you are worried about your health or that you may be experiencing PTSD, speak to your GP.