HAUNTED BY THE PAST

FLASHBACKS, NIGHTMARES AND FEELINGS OF INTENSE FEAR OR HELPLESSNESS ARE JUST SOME OF THE SYMPTOMS OF POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER, WHICH CAN BE TRIGGERED BY A HARROWING EVENT SUCH AS AN

ACCIDENT, MUGGING OR DIFFICULT CHILDBIRTH. BUT WITH THE AID OF MEDICATION AND THERAPY, IT IS POSSIBLE TO PUT THE PAST BEHIND YOU

WORDS HARRIETT AINLEY

Claire*, 29, a retail manager from north London, will never forget the evening last summer that haunted her for months afterwards and changed the way she lives her life forever. 'I was walking home from a night at the pub, feeling a bit merry and in a really good mood,' she says. 'It was about 11.30pm but I live a ten-minute walk from the pub so I wasn't concerned about walking home alone. I live just off a very busy road and there were a few people and plenty of cars about.

'I was about to turn into my street when a man grabbed me from behind and sprayed something into my face. I was instantly blinded and fell to the ground. He then started to drag me towards an alleyway. My eyes were burning and I was absolutely petrified but in that type of situation, you don't have time to think what to do. He was holding me from behind and I must have thrown my head back because I knocked him in the face and he temporarily let go. In that brief moment, I scrambled a few yards away and heard some people on the main road. I managed to shout and, although I don't

think they heard me, it scared my attacker and he ran away.'

Not a day goes by without something terrible happening to someone but what most people don't realise is that, for many, traumatic experiences can cause long-lasting psychological damage not only to the victims but to their loved ones, too.

'After the attack I ran home in

a terrible state,' says Claire. 'Luckily my boyfriend was there and he called the police. He was so upset and angry, I had to stop him going out looking for the man. I was physically fine but very shaken and I had terrible recurring nightmares for about six months afterwards. I kept reliving the incident in my mind and wondering what might have happened. I don't know whether he was trying to rob, rape or kill me and those thoughts troubled me for a long time. I didn't enjoy going out for months after the attack and I'm still very nervous walking in quiet streets even in daylight. I never walk anywhere at night any more and I'll catch a black cab or take a mini-cab only from firms that I know. I recently mentioned these feelings to my GP, who said I was probably experiencing

symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and referred me for counselling. I wish I'd gone to my GP earlier because I'm sure it would have done me – and my boyfriend – a lot of good. Our relationship was never really the same afterwards, probably because I became very anxious and detached, and we're no longer together.'

THE SYMPTOMS

In a nutshell, PTSD is an anxiety disorder characterised by feelings of intense fear or helplessness, which develop after a traumatic event. Through intrusive thoughts and images those with PTSD can re-live an event in great detail by means of flashbacks. But, points out Dr Gordon Turnbull, a consultant psychiatrist and Clinical Director of Trauma Stress Services at The Priory Ticehurst House, East Sussex, PTSD is 'a normal reaction to an extremely threatening event'. In fact, owing to the high numbers of victims of crime and disaster, PTSD now affects between one and two per cent of people in the UK. It can also indirectly affect their loved ones. 'Secondary traumatisation is quite a common occurrence,' says Dr Turnbull, 'and it is more



likely to happen to women than men, simply because women tend to be more concerned with relationships than men.'

Until fairly recently, people tended to associate PTSD with war veterans, hence the oldfashioned term 'shell-shock'. But nowadays, we know it can affect anyone of any age who has been involved in or witnessed a traumatic event that caused the person to feel intense fear, helplessness or horror. The type of incidents that can trigger PTSD vary enormously and can range from burglary, childbirth, violent personal assaults and natural or man-made disasters to being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. But they all have one thing in common – they shatter the belief we all like to hold on to that life is safe and secure.

CHILDBIRTH PROBLEMS

Jane*, 32, a teacher from Northern Ireland, developed PTSD after a complication during childbirth. After a forceps delivery, Jane's placenta didn't detach itself in the normal way. She remembers being pinned down by two midwives while a doctor used a 'sweeping motion' to try to remove her placenta, which eventually started breaking off in little pieces.

'I was in agony,' says Jane, 'and I screamed for her to stop. I then insisted on a general anaesthetic so that my placenta could be surgically removed. And just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, 24 hours after giving birth I suffered a pulmonary oedema, where my lungs filled with fluid and I had to fight to breathe. It was terrifying.

When Jane returned home, she couldn't stop thinking about the traumatic time she had spent in hospital and developed a terrible fear of not being able to breathe. This evolved into a series of flashbacks.

Although experts agree that the more shocking the event, .