

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

PTSD can affect those directly involved in a traumatic event in addition to those who witness or are closely affected by it. Approximately 8 million American adults age 18 and older suffer with PTSD each year. The disorder can affect anyone at any age, including children.

What is PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a type of anxiety disorder that can develop after a person is exposed to a frightening event or ordeal in which severe physical harm occurred or was threatened.

For most people, PTSD starts within approximately three months of the traumatic event. However, for some people, signs of PTSD don't show up until years later. Some people even forget about their traumatic experience for extended periods of time.

Traumatic events that can trigger PTSD include violent personal assaults, natural or human-caused disasters, accidents, terrorist incidents, a loved one's sudden death, military combat and similar traumas.

Symptoms

When symptoms of PTSD appear, they fall into one or more of three categories: re-experiencing, avoidance and hyper-arousal.

- **Re-experiencing:** Thoughts, images and emotions associated with the traumatic event continue to intrude into the person's life in the form of memories, nightmares and flashbacks. These intrusions are terrifying and seemingly unavoidable. They can occur at any time of the day or night. Sometimes they're triggered by sounds, smells, emotions or situations that are reminiscent of the event.
- **Avoidance:** People who've been traumatized tend to avoid reminders of the event. Certain situations, emotions and relationships can be reminders of the trauma, producing intense anxiety and fear. A combat veteran, for instance, may be unable to attend fireworks displays because they remind her of her war experience. Traumas almost always generate grief and sadness, as well as anger. These feelings can cause someone to shut down to avoid the intense pain. The "emotional anesthesia" that results may make it difficult for someone with post-traumatic stress disorder to develop or maintain close relationships with others.



- **Hyper-arousal:** Anxiety can become a real problem for people who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Their nervous systems seem to be in a constant flurry. Their hearts race and their blood pressure reaches unhealthy levels. They may have difficulty concentrating or suffer from insomnia. They can be easily startled, irritated or angered, which can lead to deteriorating relationships.

The increased social and emotional withdrawal from others that PTSD tends to promote can lead to depression. Alcohol and substance use is a common way for PTSD sufferers to try to reduce their anxiety or depression. But the relief is often temporary at best, and they may find themselves struggling with both PTSD and a substance abuse problem.

Sleep and PTSD

It is well known that sleep problems are one of many challenges for those suffering with PTSD. Sleep problems such as difficulty falling asleep, waking frequently, and having distressing dreams or nightmares are common. Getting a good night's sleep can be very difficult when a continued state of hyper-arousal or "watchfulness" is present. If you are having sleep problems due to PTSD, it's important to let your doctor or mental health professional know that you have trouble sleeping. Describe exactly what the problems are. Also report any physical problems that may be contributing to your sleep problems. For example, chronic pain associated with traumatic injuries can cause trouble sleeping.

Treatment

It's important to know that feeling depressed, guilty, angry and/or stressed out is common after a traumatic event. If such difficult symptoms are continuing, contact your physician or a mental health professional who specializes in assisting people who have been traumatized. Treatment for PTSD can be quite effective, and can include some or all of the following components.

- **Cognitive-behavioral psychotherapy—** Healing often occurs with reliving the memory of the trauma in the context of a supportive therapeutic relationship and ultimately with a change in the personal meaning of the traumatic event. Treatment tends to focus on helping people regain a sense of control and safety, while reducing feelings of anxiety. People are encouraged to talk about what happened, and examine feelings of rage, self-blame or guilt. Each person with PTSD is treated according to individual symptoms and needs. A therapist teaches skills that can make the memory of trauma more tolerable. People may learn how to manage anger and rage, or how to express grief. Relaxation skills help people cope with anxiety.
- **EMDR—**Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) is a treatment procedure that involves using systematic eye movements to help someone with PTSD reduce the power of emotionally charged memories of past traumatic events.



- **Family therapy**—This can help close relatives understand and cope better with a family member’s PTSD problems, which may include the apparent rejection of loved ones and/or deteriorating communication.
- **Medication**—A physician may prescribe an FDA-approved antidepressant such as sertraline (Zoloft) or paroxetine (Paxil). These support psychotherapy by controlling PTSD symptoms like sadness, worry and anger. Medication may only be required for a few weeks, but in some cases it may be needed for several years.
- **Peer support**—People struggling with PTSD meet with other survivors of traumatic events, benefitting from the shared experience and emotions as part of helping each other regain confidence.

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