

## Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary or dangerous event. It is natural to feel afraid during and after a traumatic situation. Fear is a part of the body's fight or flight response, which helps us avoid or respond to potential danger. Individuals can experience a range of emotions after trauma, and most people recover from initial symptoms over time. Those who continue may be diagnosed with PTSD.

Anyone can develop PTSD at any age. This includes combat veterans and people who have experienced or witnessed a physical or sexual assault, abuse, an accident, a disaster, or other serious event. People with PTSD often feel stressed or frightened, even when they are not in danger. According to the National Center for PTSD, a program of the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, about six out of every 100 people will experience PTSD at some time in their lives.

Symptoms of PTSD usually begin within three months of the triggering traumatic event, but can emerge later. To meet the criteria for PTSD, one must have symptoms for longer than one month, and the symptoms must be severe enough to interfere with aspects of daily life, such as relationships or work.

After a dangerous event, it is natural to have some symptoms. For example, some individuals feel detached from the experience, as though they are observing things rather than experiencing them. A mental health professional who has experience helping people with PTSD, such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, or clinical social worker, can determine if symptoms meet the criteria for PTSD

An individual must exhibit all of the following symptoms for at least one month to be diagnosed with PTSD. The symptoms include 1. At least one re-experiencing symptom, 2. At least one avoidance symptom, 3. At least two arousal and reactivity symptoms, 4. At least two cognition and mood symptoms.

Re-experiencing symptoms include flashbacks in which the individual relives the traumatic event, including physical symptoms such as a racing heart or sweating; has recurring memories or dreams of the event; experiencing distressing thoughts; feeling physical signs of stress like fatigue, insomnia, rapid heartbeat, tense muscles and grinding teeth. Thoughts and feelings can trigger these symptoms, as can words, objects or situations that are reminders of the event.

Avoidance symptoms include avoiding places, events, or objects that are reminders of the traumatic experience and shutting out thoughts or feelings associated to the traumatic event. Avoidance symptoms may cause people to change their routines. An example is someone avoiding driving or riding in a car after a serious car accident.

Arousal and reactivity symptoms include being easily startled, feeling tense, on guard, or on edge; having difficulty concentrating; having difficulty falling and/or staying asleep; feeling irritable and having angry or aggressive outbursts; engaging in risky, reckless or destructive behavior. Arousal symptoms are often chronic. They can lead to feelings of stress and anger which interfere with parts of daily life, such as sleeping, eating, and concentrating.

Cognition and mood symptoms include trouble remembering key facts about the traumatic experience; negative thoughts about oneself and the world; exaggerated feelings of blame directed at oneself or others; ongoing negative emotions, such as fear, anger, guilt, or shame; losing interest in enjoyable activities; feelings of social isolation. Cognition and mood symptoms can begin or worsen after the traumatic event. They can lead a person to feel detached from friends and/or family members.

Not everyone who experiences dangerous or traumatic events develops PTSD. Risk factors that may increase the likelihood of developing PTSD include: being exposed to previous traumatic experiences, particularly during childhood; being hurt or seeing others hurt or killed; feeling horror, helplessness, or extreme fear; having little or no social support after the event; dealing with extra stress after the event, such as loss of a loved one, pain and injury, or loss of a job or home.

There are resilience factors which may reduce the likelihood of developing PTSD. These are 1. Seeking out support from friends, family and support groups; 2. Learning to feel okay with one's actions in response to a traumatic event; 3. Having a coping strategy for getting through and learning from the trauma; 4. Being prepared and able to respond to upsetting events as they occur, despite feeling fear.

It is important for anyone with PTSD symptoms to work with a mental health professional preferably one who has experience treating PTSD. The main treatments for addressing PTSD are psychotherapy, medications, or a combination of the two. A mental health professional will help patients find the best treatment plan for their specific symptoms and needs. Research shows that support from family and friends also can be an important part of recovery.