

# Symptoms

## Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

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Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is caused by very stressful, frightening or distressing events.

Someone with PTSD often relives the traumatic event through nightmares and flashbacks.

They may have feelings of isolation, irritability and guilt. They may also have problems sleeping, such as insomnia.

The symptoms of PTSD can be severe. They can have a big impact on your day-to-day life.

## Developing symptoms

In most cases, the symptoms develop during the first month after a traumatic event. In a small number of cases, there may be a delay of months or even years before symptoms start to appear.

Some people with PTSD have long periods when their symptoms are less noticeable. This is followed by periods where they get worse. Other people have constant, severe symptoms.

The symptoms of PTSD are different for everyone.

But they generally fall into 3 categories:

- re-experiencing
- avoidance and emotional numbing
- hyperarousal (feeling 'on edge')

## Re-experiencing

Re-experiencing is the most common symptom of PTSD.

This is when you relive the traumatic event through:

- flashbacks
- nightmares
- repetitive and distressing images or sensations
- physical sensations – such as pain, sweating, nausea or trembling

You may have constant negative thoughts about your experience. You may repeatedly ask yourself questions that prevent you from coming to terms with the event. For example, you may wonder why the event happened to you and if you could have done anything to stop it. This can lead to feelings of guilt or shame.

## Avoidance and emotional numbing

Trying to avoid being reminded of the traumatic event is another key symptom of PTSD. This usually means avoiding certain people or places that remind you of the trauma. It could also mean that you avoid talking to anyone about your experience.

You may try to push memories of the event out of your mind, or distract yourself with work or hobbies.

You may not feel or express emotions. This is called emotional numbing. Over time you may become isolated and withdrawn. You may also stop doing things you used to enjoy.

## Hyperarousal (feeling 'on edge')

PTSD can make you feel very anxious and you may find it difficult to relax. You may be constantly aware of threats and easily startled. This state of mind is hyperarousal.

Hyperarousal often leads to:

- irritability
- angry outbursts
- [sleeping problems](#)
- difficulty concentrating

## Other problems

PTSD also has a number of other problems, including:

- other mental health problems - such as depression, anxiety or phobias
- self-harming or destructive behaviour - such as drug misuse or alcohol misuse
- other physical symptoms - such as headaches, dizziness, chest pains and stomach aches

PTSD sometimes leads to work-related problems and the breakdown of relationships.

Find out more about:

- [anxiety](#)
- [depression](#)

- [phobias](#)

## PTSD in children

PTSD can affect children as well as adults. Children with PTSD can have similar symptoms to adults. For example, having trouble sleeping and upsetting nightmares.

Like adults, children with PTSD may also lose interest in activities they used to enjoy. They may also have physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches.

Children with PTSD may also have other symptoms such as:

- bedwetting
- being unusually anxious about being separated from a parent or other adult
- re-enacting traumatic events through their play

## When to get medical advice

It's normal to have upsetting and confusing thoughts after a traumatic event. But in most people, these get better over a few weeks.

Talk to your GP if you or your child:

- are still having problems about 4 weeks after the traumatic event
- have trouble doing everyday things because of the symptoms
- are worried about any symptoms

Your GP will talk to you about your symptoms in as much detail as possible. They'll ask if you've had a traumatic event in the past and if you have any flashbacks or nightmares about it.

Your GP may refer you to mental health specialists for treatment.

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