

What is PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that develops in some people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic or frightening event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident or assault, a terrorist act or military combat, or those who have been threatened with death, sexual violence or injury. The stress caused by witnessing or experiencing the trauma can affect all aspects of a person's life, including their mental, emotional and physical well-being.

Individuals with PTSD often relive the past trauma in painful memories, recurring dreams or nightmares. They may avoid activities, situations or places that remind them of the event. PTSD symptoms often co-exist with other conditions such as substance use disorders, depression and anxiety.

PTSD can happen to anyone, at any age. The rate of PTSD worldwide is about 3.9% of the general population. In people who have experienced trauma, the prevalence rate is higher at 5.6%.¹

Common signs and symptoms of PTSD

Symptoms of PTSD often start within three months of a traumatic event, but in some instances they can emerge much later.

Negative changes in mood

These symptoms begin after the trauma and can lead a person to feel emotionally withdrawn from friends or family:

- trouble remembering events or the traumatic event
- negative thoughts about oneself or the world
- negative emotions, such as fear, anger, guilt or shame
- loss of interest in activities that were once enjoyed
- feelings of social isolation
- angry or aggressive outbursts
- engaging in risky, reckless or destructive behaviour
- difficulty feeling positive emotions, such as happiness or hope.

Re-experiencing

Certain thoughts, feelings, words, objects or situations associated with the trauma can trigger the following:

- flashbacks – reliving the event, including physical symptoms such as a racing heart or sweating
- recurring memories or dreams related to the event
- distorted thoughts about the event that cause feelings of blame
- distressing thoughts.

Avoidance behaviours

- staying away from places, people, events or objects that are reminders of the experience
- avoiding thoughts or feelings related to the traumatic event.

Changes in physical reactions

- being easily startled
- feeling tense, on guard or “on edge”
- difficulty concentrating
- irritability
- insomnia
- increased blood pressure and heart rate
- muscle tension, joint pain, headaches, back pain or other types of pain.

What causes PTSD?

People do not have the same reactions to traumatic events, and often what causes one person to experience PTSD may not cause the same reaction in another person. Witnessing or experiencing some of the following may cause some individuals to develop PTSD:

- experiencing violence, military combat or a terrorist attack
- surviving a natural disaster, such as flooding, an earthquake or a pandemic
- physical or sexual assault, bullying or harassment
- an automobile accident
- being kidnapped or held hostage
- seeing other people hurt or killed
- losing someone close to you in upsetting circumstances, such as suicide
- being diagnosed with a life-threatening condition.

¹ Koenen KC, Ratanatharathorn A, Ng L, McLaughlin KA, Bromet EJ, Stein DJ, et al. Posttraumatic stress disorder in the World Mental Health Surveys.

When to seek help for PTSD

It is often hard for individuals to know when to seek help if they are experiencing PTSD after a traumatic event. Some guidelines for when to consider seeking professional help or treatment include:

- having reactions to the traumatic event that is interfering with home life, work and/or relationships
- thinking of harming oneself or someone else
- being constantly on edge, irritable, highly anxious or distressed
- being unable to respond emotionally to others
- taking risks or not caring what happens to oneself
- using alcohol, drugs or gambling to cope
- having severe sleeping difficulties.

Individuals at high risk of developing PTSD include:

- combat veterans or civilian victims of war
- rape or sexual assault survivors
- children who are neglected or sexually, physically or verbally abused, or adults who were abused as children
- Survivors of natural disasters, such as tornadoes or earthquakes.

Treating PTSD

A proper diagnosis of PTSD should be made by a mental health care professional who has experience of treating patients with PTSD. Treatments include the following:

Psychotherapy (talking therapy)

Trauma-focused psychotherapy involves working with a therapist to focus on the individual's memory of the traumatic event and what it means to them. Such therapies come in different forms, including:

- trauma-focused cognitive processing therapy, which teaches the person how to change upsetting thoughts and feelings they have had since the trauma;
- prolonged exposure, which helps the individual to gradually approach trauma-related memories, feelings and situations that they have been avoiding and replacing distorted and irrational thoughts about the experience with a more balanced picture; and
- stress inoculation training, which teaches coping skills to find new ways to manage PTSD symptoms.

Medication

In some cases, medicines such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRI) can be effective in lessening the symptoms of PTSD in the short term. They are often used with psychotherapy, and are often discontinued when an individual's coping skills become better developed.

How can you help yourself if you are experiencing PTSD?

If you have experienced a current or past trauma and feel that you are dealing with symptoms of PTSD, make an appointment with your doctor or a mental health professional. They will be able to diagnose your symptoms and find the right treatment for you. The following may help before or during your treatment:

- Learn about PTSD. Health care professionals or the resources listed below are good sources for you to learn about the signs and symptoms of PTSD.
- Don't self-medicate. Drugs and alcohol are unhealthy ways of coping and may make your symptoms harder to address when you do begin treatment.
- Take care of yourself. Eating a healthy diet and taking regular exercise can help reduce the stress and anxiety that usually come with PTSD.
- Connect with friends or family members. Staying in close contact with loved ones can help you feel supported and encouraged during difficult times.
- Find a support group. Support groups are available online as well as in person through hospitals and clinics and are an excellent way of meeting other people with similar feelings and experiences of PTSD.

How can you help a friend or family member who is experiencing PTSD?

PTSD can be challenging for friends and family members. During the first month after a traumatic event, a person may experience severe symptoms. Often, this involves feeling afraid or on edge and having flashbacks, nightmares or other symptoms. If you have a loved one who has PTSD, here are a few ways in which you can support them through their diagnosis:

- Listening. Offering your time to listen to someone with PTSD can help them to cope with their symptoms. You can ask them questions such as "What are you experiencing right now?" or "Is there anything you'd like to talk about?". Make sure they know that you want to hear about their feelings without judgement, but don't push.