

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the development of symptoms following exposure to a traumatic event. Any kind of extreme stress can lead to development of PTSD. Typically, it involves direct personal experience surrounding death or serious injury, witnessing a stressful event, or learning about an unexpected or violent death or injury to a loved one.

Traumatic events that can be experienced directly include assaults, serious car accidents, natural disasters such as an earthquake, personal assaults and abuse, terrorist attacks, and military combat.

You don't have to be hurt to experience PTSD. Witnessing any type of personal or environmental disaster, being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, or being threatened with violence or being hurt can lead to PTSD.

Most people feel stressed after going through something traumatic. Strong emotions; feeling easily irritated; jitters; and trouble sleeping, eating, or concentrating can all be part of a typical and temporary reaction to an overwhelming event. Also, frequent thoughts and images of what happened, nightmares, or fears can be a part of recovering from stress. These may or may not be signs of PTSD.

When someone has PTSD, the symptoms of stress are intense and last for longer than a month. For some people, the symptoms of PTSD begin soon after the trauma, but others have a delayed response.

What are the Symptoms of PTSD?

PTSD has certain characteristic symptoms that usually develop within three months of the traumatic event. People with PTSD generally experience some or all of these symptoms:

- **Reliving the traumatic event.** People with PTSD might have nightmares, flashbacks, or disturbing mental images about the trauma.
- **Avoiding reminders of the trauma.** People with PTSD may avoid people, places, or activities that remind them of the stressful event. They may also avoid talking about what happened.
- **Emotional numbness.** Many people with PTSD feel numb or detached; they may not feel the same way about other people or the world as they did before. This could be caused by the overproduction of certain chemicals that block sensation during extreme stress.
- **Hypervigilance.** People with PTSD may be easily startled, on edge, jumpy, irritable, or tense. This may be due to high levels of stress hormones in the body. Difficulty concentrating and trouble sleeping may also be part of this hyper-alert state.

Who Develops PTSD?

People of any age — kids, teens, and adults — can develop PTSD. But not everyone who experiences a serious trauma develops it. In fact, most people do not. Many recover from life-threatening traumas without developing PTSD. This ability to cope and bounce back is called “resilience”.

What makes some people resilient to extremely stressful events when others have trouble coping? Researchers have found that certain things can help us recover faster from trauma. Everything from someone's belief in his or her ability to overcome problems, to the types of hormones a person's body produces, may play a role in how we cope with extreme stress.

What we do know is how important it is to have people to talk to when you go through something like this — friends, family, or a counselor. Support groups are also good places to vent about thoughts and feelings.

The intensity or circumstances of a trauma can also affect how we react to it. National disasters like the terrorist attacks of 9/11 can cause widespread anxiety, regardless of whether someone was there or not. In some cases, seeing these events and the traumatic images portrayed on TV and the Internet can lead to symptoms of PTSD.

How is PTSD Treated?

PTSD usually doesn't just go away on its own. Without treatment, symptoms can last for months or years, or they may come and go in waves. Getting treatment and support can make all the difference.

Mental health professionals (such as psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors) who specialize in treating anxiety problems, are usually experienced in working with people who have PTSD.

Therapy for PTSD may involve gradually talking it through in a safe environment and learning coping skills that help with anxiety, fear, or panic. This can include relaxation techniques that help people with PTSD reset their stress response, and techniques to resolve other problems, such as sleeping difficulties. Sometimes medications can help reduce symptoms of anxiety, panic, or depression.

Healing From Trauma

Sometimes people avoid seeking professional help because they're afraid that talking about an incident will bring back memories or feelings that are too painful.

It can be difficult to talk about a traumatic event at first, but doing so in a safe environment, with the help and support of a trained professional, can often lead to long-term healing. Working through the memories and worries can help reduce symptoms like nightmares and flashbacks. It can also help people avoid potentially harmful behaviors and emotions, like extreme anger or drug use.