

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Symptoms, Treatment and Self-Help for PTSD

After a traumatic experience, it's normal to feel frightened, sad, anxious, and disconnected. But if the upset doesn't fade and you feel stuck with a constant sense of danger and painful memories, you may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It can seem like you'll never get over what happened or feel normal again. But by seeking treatment, reaching out for support, and developing new coping skills, you can overcome PTSD and move on with your life.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can develop following a traumatic event that threatens your safety or makes you feel helpless. Most people associate PTSD with battle-scarred soldiers—and military combat is the most common cause in men—but any overwhelming life experience can trigger PTSD, especially if the event feels unpredictable and uncontrollable.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can affect those who personally experience the catastrophe, those who witness it, and those who pick up the pieces afterwards, including emergency workers and law enforcement officers. It can even occur in the friends or family members of those who went through the actual trauma.

PTSD develops differently from person to person. While the symptoms of PTSD most commonly develop in the hours or days following the traumatic event, it can sometimes take weeks, months, or even years before they appear.

Traumatic events that can lead to PTSD include:

- War
- Natural disasters
- Car or plane crashes
- Terrorist attacks
- Sudden death of a loved one
- Rape
- Kidnapping

- Assault
- Sexual or physical abuse
- Childhood neglect

Or any shattering event that leaves you stuck and feeling helpless and hopeless

The difference between PTSD and a normal response to trauma. The traumatic events that lead to post-traumatic stress disorder are usually so overwhelming and frightening that they would upset anyone. Following a traumatic event, almost everyone experiences at least some of the symptoms of PTSD. When your sense of safety and trust are shattered, it's normal to feel crazy, disconnected, or numb. It's very common to have bad dreams, feel fearful, and find it difficult to stop thinking about what happened. **These are normal reactions to abnormal events.**

For most people, however, these symptoms are short-lived. They may last for several days or even weeks, but they gradually lift. But if you have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), the symptoms don't decrease. You don't feel a little better each day. In fact, you may start to feel worse. A normal response to trauma becomes PTSD when you become stuck. After a traumatic experience, the mind and the body are in shock. But as you make sense of what happened and process your emotions, you come out of it. With post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), however, you remain in psychological shock. Your memory of what happened and your feelings about it are disconnected. In order to move on, it's important to face and feel your memories and emotions.

Signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

The symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can arise suddenly, gradually, or come and go over time. Sometimes symptoms appear seemingly out of the blue. At other times, they are triggered by something that reminds you of the original traumatic event, such as a noise, an image, certain words, or a smell.

While everyone experiences PTSD differently, there are three main types of symptoms:

1. Re-experiencing the traumatic event
2. Avoiding reminders of the trauma

3. Increased anxiety and emotional arousal

Symptoms of PTSD: Re-experiencing the traumatic event

- Intrusive, upsetting memories of the event
- Flashbacks (acting or feeling like the event is happening again)
- Nightmares (either of the event or of other frightening things)
- Feelings of intense distress when reminded of the trauma
- Intense physical reactions to reminders of the event (e.g. pounding heart, rapid breathing, nausea, muscle tension, sweating)

Symptoms of PTSD: Avoidance and numbing

- Avoiding activities, places, thoughts, or feelings that remind you of the trauma
- Inability to remember important aspects of the trauma
- Loss of interest in activities and life in general
- Feeling detached from others and emotionally numb
- Sense of a limited future (you don't expect to live a normal life span, get married, have a career)

Symptoms of PTSD: Increased anxiety and emotional arousal

- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Difficulty concentrating
- Hyper vigilance (on constant "red alert")
- Feeling jumpy and easily startled

Other common symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

- Anger and irritability
- Guilt, shame, or self-blame
- Substance abuse

- Feelings of mistrust and betrayal
- Depression and hopelessness
- Suicidal thoughts and feelings
- Feeling alienated and alone
- Physical aches and pains

Symptoms of PTSD in children and adolescents. In children—especially those who are very young—the symptoms of PTSD can be different than the symptoms in adults.

Symptoms in children include:

- Fear of being separated from parent
- Losing previously-acquired skills (such as toilet training)
- Sleep problems and nightmares without recognizable content
- Somber, compulsive play in which themes or aspects of the trauma are repeated
- New phobias and anxieties that seem unrelated to the trauma (such as a fear of monsters)
- Acting out the trauma through play, stories, or drawings
- Aches and pains with no apparent cause
- Irritability and aggression

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) causes and risk factors. While it's impossible to predict who will develop PTSD in response to trauma, there are certain risk factors that increase your vulnerability. Many risk factors revolve around the nature of the traumatic event itself. Traumatic events are more likely to cause PTSD when they involve a severe threat to your life or personal safety: the more extreme and prolonged the threat, the greater the risk of developing PTSD in response. Intentional, human-inflicted harm—such as rape, assault, and torture—also tends to be more traumatic than “acts of God” or more impersonal accidents and disasters. The extent to which the traumatic event was unexpected, uncontrollable, and inescapable also plays a role.

Other risk factors for PTSD include:

- Previous traumatic experiences, especially in early life
- Family history of PTSD or depression
- History of physical or sexual abuse
- History of substance abuse
- History of depression, anxiety, or another mental illness
- High level of stress in everyday life
- Lack of support after the trauma
- Lack of coping skills

Getting help for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

If you suspect that you or a loved one has post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), it's important to seek help right away. The sooner PTSD is confronted, the easier it is to overcome. If you're reluctant to seek help, keep in mind that PTSD is not a sign of weakness, and the only way to overcome it is to confront what happened to you and learn to accept it as a part of your past. This process is much easier with the guidance and support of an experienced therapist or doctor.

It's only natural to want to avoid painful memories and feelings. But if you try to numb yourself and push your memories away, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) will only get worse. You can't escape your emotions completely—they emerge under stress or whenever you let down your guard—and trying to do so is exhausting. The avoidance will ultimately harm your relationships, your ability to function, and the quality of your life.

Why Should I Seek Help for PTSD?

- **Early treatment is better.** Symptoms of PTSD may get worse. Dealing with them now might help stop them from getting worse in the future. Finding out more about what treatments work, where to look for help, and what kind of questions to ask can make it easier to get help and lead to better outcomes.

- **PTSD symptoms can change family life.** PTSD symptoms can get in the way of your family life. You may find that you pull away from loved ones, are not able to get along with people, or that you are angry or even violent. Getting help for your PTSD can help improve your family life.
- **PTSD can be related to other health problems.** PTSD symptoms can make physical health problems worse. For example, studies have shown a relationship between PTSD and heart trouble. By getting help for your PTSD you could also improve your physical health.

Source: *National Center for PTSD*

Treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) Treatment for PTSD relieves symptoms by helping you deal with the trauma you've experienced. Rather than avoiding the trauma and any reminder of it, treatment will encourage you to recall and process the emotions and sensations you felt during the original event. In addition to offering an outlet for emotions you've been bottling up, treatment for PTSD will also help restore your sense of control and reduce the powerful hold the memory of the trauma has on your life.

In treatment for PTSD, you'll:

- Explore your thoughts and feelings about the trauma
- Work through feelings of guilt, self-blame, and mistrust
- Learn how to cope with and control intrusive memories
- Address problems PTSD has caused in your life and relationships

Types of treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

- **Trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy.** Cognitive-behavioral therapy for PTSD and trauma involves carefully and gradually “exposing” yourself to thoughts, feelings, and situations that remind you of the trauma. Therapy also involves identifying upsetting thoughts about the traumatic event—particularly thoughts that are distorted and irrational—and replacing them with more balanced picture.
- **Family therapy.** Since PTSD affects both you and those close to you, family therapy can be especially productive. Family therapy can help your loved ones understand what

you're going through. It can also help everyone in the family communicate better and work through relationship problems caused by PTSD symptoms.

- **Medication** is sometimes prescribed to people with PTSD to relieve secondary symptoms of depression or anxiety. Antidepressants such as Prozac and Zoloft are the medications most commonly used for PTSD. While antidepressants may help you feel less sad, worried, or on edge, they do not treat the causes of PTSD.
- **EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing)** incorporates elements of cognitive-behavioral therapy with eye movements or other forms of rhythmic, left-right stimulation, such as hand taps or sounds. Eye movements and other bilateral forms of stimulation are thought to work by “unfreezing” the brain’s information processing system, which is interrupted in times of extreme stress.