



Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a type of mental illness. It can develop after a person goes through a disturbing event or a trauma. Physical harm may have occurred in the event.

PTSD affects those involved in the trauma. It can also affect people who saw or were impacted by it. About eight million American adults age 18 and older suffer with PTSD each year. Anyone can have PTSD, even children.

For most people, PTSD starts within three months of the trauma. But for some, the signs don't show up until years later. A person may even forget about the event for a long time.

Many events can cause PTSD. They include:

- Violent personal assaults.
- Natural or human-caused disasters.
- Accidents.
- Terrorist attacks.
- A loved one's sudden death.
- Military combat.

Symptoms

The symptoms of PTSD include:

- **Seeming to be in the trauma again.** Reminders of the event keep showing up in the person's life. They take the form of memories. Some people have nightmares. Or flashbacks. These feelings can be terrifying. And they are hard to avoid. They can occur at any time. They may be triggered by sounds or smells. Or an emotion or situation may remind the person of the event.
- **Avoiding situations.** People who have gone through trauma tend to avoid things that remind them of it. Certain places or emotions can be reminders. Other people can be too. They can produce strong feelings. A veteran may be unable to go to fireworks displays. They may remind him or her of war. Traumas may cause grief and sadness. They also cause anger. These feelings can cause someone to shut down. This helps them avoid the pain. This can make it hard for someone with PTSD to be close to others.
- **Being on edge.** Anxiety can be a problem for people with PTSD. Their hearts race. Their blood pressure goes up. They may not be able to focus. They may have sleep problems. They can be easily startled or angered. This can lead to problems with other people.

People who have PTSD may pull away from others. This can result in depression. They may use alcohol and drugs. This may make them feel better. But it does not last long. It can lead to drug or alcohol problems too.

Sleep and PTSD

People with PTSD often have sleep problems. They may have trouble falling asleep. Or they wake up a lot. Bad dreams or nightmares are common. Getting a good night's sleep can be very hard. It's even harder when a person with PTSD is on edge.

If you think you have sleep problems due to PTSD, tell your healthcare provider. Describe what the problems are. Report any physical problems that may be keeping you from sleeping. For example, pain from injuries can make it hard to sleep.

Treatment

A person with PTSD may feel sad or guilty. Some feel angry. If you have these symptoms, contact your healthcare provider. This should be someone who knows how to help people with PTSD. It can be treated. Treatment for PTSD may include:

- **Therapy.** Reliving the trauma in talk therapy may help. This is done in a safe setting with a provider. The provider works with the person to change how he or she sees the event. This helps a person gain a sense of control and safety. It also reduces anxiety. Providers ask people to talk about the event. They discuss feelings. They are taught ways to relax. This helps many cope with stress.
- **Family therapy.** Someone with PTSD may seem to reject loved ones. Family members may have a hard time talking to each other. This type of therapy can help other family members learn to cope better with a person's PTSD.
- **Medicines.** Antidepressant drugs can help. They support therapy by reducing PTSD symptoms. Medicine may only be needed for a few weeks. But it may be needed for years.
- **Peer support.** This involves talking with others who have been through traumas. It helps a person with PTSD to share feelings and emotions. It helps him or her feel in control.

To learn more:

Anxiety and Depression Association of America.

www.adaa.org.

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs – National Center for PTSD.

www.ptsd.va.gov.

National Institute of Mental Health.

www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml.

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