



Employee Assistance Program

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a treatable illness that many people develop after experiencing a terrifying event. This guide is intended to provide a brief overview of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—including its causes, symptoms and the treatments available. This guide is for informational purposes only; if you believe that you or a loved one may be suffering from PTSD, please seek immediate medical attention.

What Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) classifies PTSD as “an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened.”

People of all ages, from young children to the elderly, can suffer from PTSD. Anyone who experiences a terrifying event may be at risk of developing PTSD. For example, some events that trigger PTSD include:

- Rape or sexual abuse
- Abuse or attacks of any kind
- Violent crimes
- An airplane or car crash
- Natural or human-caused disaster
- Military combat or war
- Events where your life or the lives of loved ones were threatened

Essentially, if you were a victim of—or witnessed—any type of life threatening or life-altering event, you may be at risk for PTSD.

At any given time in the U.S., millions of people suffer from PTSD.

What are the Symptoms of PTSD?

Many people with PTSD repeatedly re-experience traumatic events from the past, particularly when they are exposed to similar situations (including sounds, smells, physical locations, or other reminders). Symptoms typically begin within three months of the traumatic event, but sometimes don't start until years after the incident. People with PTSD often recall their terrifying experiences in the form of flashback episodes; memories; nightmares; or other frightening thoughts. These experiences can be triggered by an anniversary of the event, or when people with PTSD are exposed to events or objects that remind them of their trauma. Other signs of PTSD are emotionally and physically debilitating symptoms that occur, typically for longer than a month, such as:

- Emotional numbness
- Sleep disturbances
- Depression

- Extreme anxiety—especially when something happens without warning
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Feelings of intense guilt
- Lack of trust in others
- Alcohol and/or substance abuse
- Headaches
- Gastrointestinal complaints
- Dizziness
- Chest pain
- Chronic pain in other parts of the body

Some cases last six months to a year, others last longer depending on the severity and treatment of the symptoms. If you or someone you know exhibits one or more of these symptoms, it does not necessarily mean they have PTSD. However, if they have experienced a frightening or life-altering event at some point in their lives, it may be PTSD.

Most studies show that talking through experiences soon after a catastrophe may help reduce the symptoms of PTSD. If you or a loved one have been through a traumatic event, and are experiencing any of the symptoms outlined previously, ask your doctor about PTSD. Describe your symptoms in detail and let the doctor know if you suffer from scary flashbacks, depression or bursts of anger—especially if these symptoms are impacting your everyday life.

If your doctor diagnoses you with PTSD, he or she may be able to treat you directly, or you may be referred to a mental health professional that specializes in PTSD.

According to the National Institute of Mental Health, treatments for PTSD include:

- Prescribed medications to help ease the symptoms of depression and anxiety, while promoting sleep and rest
- One-on-one supportive therapy with a doctor or licensed therapist
- Group therapy
- Exposure therapy (where the patient gradually and repeatedly relives the frightening experience under controlled conditions to help him or her work through the trauma)

Most studies show that giving people the opportunity to talk about their experiences very soon after a catastrophe may help reduce the symptoms of PTSD.

Helpful Resources

The following organizations may be able to offer additional support and information on PTSD.

National Institute of Mental Health

Office of Communications and Public Liaison 6001 Executive Blvd Room 8184, MSC 9663 Bethesda, MD 20892-9663 888-8ANXIETY (888-826-9438) 301-443-4513 TTY: 301-443-8431 <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>.

This site offers comprehensive information on all forms of mental illness, and includes detailed information about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, resources and treatment options.

National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Department of Veteran Affairs Washington, D.C. 20420 802-296-6300 <http://www.ncptsd.org>

The web site provides veterans of war, their families, and the general public with information on PTSD and other related post-war conditions and disorders.

National Center for Victims of Crime

2000 M Street, N.W., Suite 480 Washington, D.C. 20036 800-FYI-CALL

(800-394-2255) TTY: 800-211-7996 www.ncvc.org

This organization provides crime victims and concerned individuals with practical information on appropriate local services, counseling, advocacy, safety planning, shelters and other supportive services.

Suggested Reading

Coping With Trauma: A Guide to Self-Understanding, by Jon Allen. American Psychiatric Press, 1995.

This book explains the effects of traumatic experience on the survivor's personality, physiological functioning, and social relationships. Jon Allen discusses the symptoms of PTSD, dissociative disorders, and other recognized psychiatric disorders associated with trauma, and describes treatment approaches and self-help techniques.

Trauma and Recovery, by Judith Herman. Basic Books, 1993.

Judith Herman asserts that just as "traumatic syndromes have basic features in common; the recovery process also follows a common pathway." This book explores ways in which the treatment process can empower the survivor.

I Can't Get Over It: A Handbook for Trauma Survivors, by Aphrodite Matsakis. New Harbinger. Publications, 1992.

This book explains in detail the symptoms of PTSD, and suggests a wide variety of techniques for coping with them.

**Federal Occupational Health's
Employee Assistance Program (EAP)
(800) 222-0364 | (888) 262-7848 (TTY)
www.foh4you.com**

This article is background information and, as such, does not address specific health or mental health concerns. For specific guidance on handling issues that arise with respect to your health, please consult with your health care or mental health professional.

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