



HEALTH ASSOCIATES®

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Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

What is PTSD?



You may have posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) if you've been through a traumatic event and are having trouble dealing with it. While it is normal to have some anxiety after a traumatic event, it often goes away in time. But with PTSD, the anxiety is more intense, and the trauma is relived through nightmares, intrusive memories, and flashbacks. These can be vivid memories that seem real. The symptoms of PTSD can cause problems with relationships and make it hard to cope with daily life. But it can be treated. With help, you can feel better.

What Causes PTSD?

PTSD may be triggered by something that:

- Happened to you
- Happened to someone close to you
- You saw

Examples include:

- Serious accidents, such as car or train wrecks
- Natural disasters, such as floods or earthquakes
- Manmade tragedies, such as bombings, a plane crash, a shooting
- Violent personal attacks, such as a mugging, rape, torture, being held captive, or kidnapping
- Military combat
- Abuse in childhood or adulthood

Who Is At Risk of PTSD?

There are many risk factors for having PTSD. Recognizing and addressing them can help prevent PTSD, when possible. These risk factors include:

- Lack of family or social support resources
- Repeated exposure to traumatic circumstances
- Personal history of trauma or of an acute stress or anxiety disorder
- Family history of mental health disorders
- Personality traits of vulnerability and a lack of resilience
- History of childhood trauma
- Personality disorder or traits including borderline personality disorder, paranoia, dependency, or antisocial tendencies

What are the symptoms of PTSD?

Symptoms of PTSD last more than a month. They may include:

- Unwanted or intense memories of a trauma
- Nightmares
- Vivid memories or flashbacks that make you feel like you're reliving the event
- Feeling worried, fearful, anxious, or suspicious
- Strong reactions when you're reminded of the trauma (or sometimes for no obvious reason at all)
- Intrusive thoughts about combat, death, or killing
- Feeling disconnected or isolated, as if you're not yourself
- Loss of interest in things you once enjoyed
- Feeling agitated, tense, on edge, or easily startled
- Bursts of anger or irritation
- Problems focusing
- Trouble falling or staying asleep

The symptoms of PTSD may look like other mental health conditions. Always see your healthcare provider for a diagnosis.

How Is PTSD Diagnosed?

Not every person who goes through trauma gets PTSD, or has symptoms at all. PTSD is diagnosed if your symptoms last more than 1 month. Symptoms often begin within 3 months of the trauma. But they can also start months or years later.

How long this illness lasts varies. Some people recover within 6 months. Others have symptoms that last much longer.

How Is PTSD Treated?

Treatment will depend on your symptoms, age, and general health. It will also depend on how severe the condition is.

You may think that asking for help is a sign of weakness. In fact, taking action to make your life better takes a lot of courage. Talking about a trauma can be hard. But it can make a big difference. The main treatment for PTSD is counseling. You'll work with a trained therapist to learn new ways to cope with your experiences. Medicine may also be prescribed to help with anxiety, depression, or sleep. Most people with PTSD have a combination of counseling and medicine for treatment.

Types of Counseling

Counseling is done in a safe environment, either one-on-one or in a group. Group therapy is often done with other people who have been through similar events. PTSD is often treated with 1 or more of the following forms of counseling. Talk with your healthcare provider about your options so you can decide on a counseling format that works for you.

- Cognitive processing therapy (CPT). This type of therapy helps you cope with negative thoughts linked to the trauma. You'll work with a therapist to better understand how you think and feel about what happened. And you'll learn skills to help you cope with the trauma. CPT won't make you forget about what happened. But it can make the memories easier to live with.

- Prolonged exposure therapy. This helps you deal with thoughts and situations related to the trauma in new ways. You'll learn breathing and relaxation methods to calm yourself when you come into contact with triggers. With your therapist's help, you may go into situations that remind you of the trauma. You'll learn to reduce your reactions over time. This can help with avoidance. You'll also talk about the trauma to help you gain control over how you think and feel about it.
- Other therapies. Other therapies for PTSD include coping skills training, acceptance and commitment training, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), family counseling, and PTSD psychoeducation.

Key Points About PTSD

- Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition in which a person has experienced a traumatic event that causes long-term stress.
- PTSD may be triggered by a traumatic event that happened to the person or someone close to them. Or it may be something that the person saw.
- PTSD can occur in children and adults.
- The person may have flashbacks, stay away from stressful situations, or withdraw emotionally.
- Diagnosis is made by a healthcare provider when the symptoms last longer than 1 month.
- Treatment involves medicine and therapy to decrease the emotional effects of the disorder and increase coping skills.

Next Steps

Tips to help you get the most from a visit to your healthcare provider:

- Know the reason for your visit and what you want to happen.
- Before your visit, write down questions you want answered.
- Bring someone with you to help you ask questions and remember what your healthcare provider tells you.
- At the visit, write down the name of a new diagnosis, and any new medicines, treatments, or tests. Also write down any new instructions your healthcare provider gives you.
- Know why a new medicine or treatment is prescribed, and how it will help you. Also know what the side effects are.
- Ask if your condition can be treated in other ways.
- Know why a test or procedure is recommended and what the results could mean.
- Know what to expect if you do not take the medicine or have the test or procedure.
- If you have a follow-up appointment, write down the date, time, and purpose for that visit.
- Know how you can contact your healthcare provider if you have questions.