

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition triggered by experiencing or witnessing a terrifying (i.e., shocking, scary or dangerous) event or multiple events. While it is natural to feel afraid during and after a traumatic situation, PTSD is something more.

Fear can trigger many split-second changes in the body to help defend against or avoid danger. The fight or flight response is a typical reaction meant to protect a person from harm. Getting effective treatment after PTSD symptoms develop can be critical to reducing symptoms and improving function.

Symptoms

PTSD symptoms may start within one month of a traumatic event but can first appear years later. There are four types of symptoms: intrusive, arousal or reactive memories; avoidance; negative changes in thinking and mood; and physical and emotional reactions.

Signs of intrusive, arousal or reactive memories include:

- Prone to angry outbursts
- Startles easily
- Feels tense or on edge
- Experiences recurrent, unwanted distressing memories of the event
- Relives the event (flashbacks)
- Experiences severe emotional distress or physical reactions to memory triggers of the event

- Experiences upsetting dreams or memories about the traumatic event

Avoidance:

- Shuns places, activities or people that remind of the traumatic event
- Avoids thoughts or feelings related to the traumatic event
- Tries to avoid thinking or talking about the event

Cognition and mood symptoms:

- Distorted feelings like guilt or blame
- Feeling detached from family or friends
- Hopelessness about the future
- Negative thoughts about oneself or the world
- Trouble remembering key features of the traumatic event

Physical and emotional reactions:

- Always on guard for danger
- Easily startled or frightened
- Self-destructive behavior, such as drinking too much or driving too fast
- Trouble sleeping or concentrating

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131501LA1222-I OHHLV7VEN1122

Diagnosis

To be diagnosed with PTSD, an adult must have all of the following for at least one month:

- At least one re-experiencing symptom
- At least one avoidance symptom
- At least two arousal and reactivity symptoms
- At least two cognition and mood symptoms

Risk factors

People of all ages can have PTSD. However, there are some factors that may make a person more likely to develop PTSD after a traumatic event, such as:

- Childhood abuse
- Enduring intense and/or long-lasting trauma
- Having a job that increases risk of exposure to traumatic events (e.g., military or first responders)
- History of other mental health problems such as depression or anxiety
- Lack of friends and family for a support system
- Substance use issues

Types of traumatic events that may lead to PTSD

- Being threatened with a weapon
- Childhood physical abuse
- Combat exposure
- Physical assault
- Sexual violence

Screening tools

Life Events Checklist →

Abbreviated PCL-C →

Clinical guidelines

American Psychological Association →

References

1. "Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Mayo Clinic, accessed Nov. 18, 2022, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355967>.
2. "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," National Institute of Mental Health, accessed Nov. 18, 2022, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>.