

Longer term Reactions to Traumatic Events - Post Traumatic Stress Reactions

After experiencing a sudden, shocking, scary or dangerous event, some individuals have trouble managing the traumatic memories of their experiences. It almost seems as though they are “haunted” by these memories. As a result of these intrusive memories, many have difficulty functioning at home, at work, at school and in social situations.

According to the National Center for PTSD: *For most people, if symptoms occur, they will slowly decrease over time. All kinds of trauma survivors commonly experience stress reactions. This is true for veterans, children, and disaster rescue or relief workers. If you understand what is happening when you or someone you know reacts to a traumatic event, you may be less fearful and better able to handle things.*

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric diagnosis that can be used to describe the problems resulting from memories of the event, and must last *more than a month* to be considered PTSD. The course of the illness varies. Some people recover within 6 months, while others have symptoms that last much longer. And in some individuals, the condition becomes chronic and lasts a life-time. (NIMH) Symptoms usually begin early, within 3 months of the traumatic incident, but sometimes they begin years afterward. According to the National Center for PTSD, about 7 or 8 out of every 100 people will experience PTSD at some point in their lives. Women are more likely to develop PTSD than men, and genes may make some people more likely to develop PTSD than others.

Individuals who have PTSD share common characteristics:

- 1) Each has experienced a traumatic event. (An event which is unpredictable, overwhelming, disrupts our sense of control, viewed as life threatening, is sudden and unexpected; damages our beliefs and assumptions about our world, and an event with a predictable aftermath).
- 2) Each relives some part of the traumatic event;
- 3) Each attempts to avoid some or all the things that remind them of the traumatic event; and
- 4) Each experiences some kind of heightened agitation about the traumatic event.

Some common symptoms of PTSD:

1. Problems sleeping/nightmares
2. Unwanted memories/flashbacks
3. Frightening thoughts
4. Pulling away from loved ones.
5. Eating too much or too little.
6. Guilt about surviving the event.
7. Not wanting to talk about the event.
8. Alcohol and other drug abuse.
9. More anger than usual.
10. Depression and/or anxiety.
11. Limited sense of the future.
12. Increased concerns for safety.

Are you impacted by a traumatic event in your life?

— Did you suffer any physical injury as a result of the traumatic event?

- During the event, did you fear you might be seriously injured or killed? Are you having bad dreams or nightmares?
- Do thoughts of what happened pop into your mind at any time?
- Do you sometimes feel as if you are there again having it happen all over again?
- Do reminders of what happened cause you to feel frightened?
- Do you try to avoid anything and everything to do with what happened?
- Do you find you are avoiding people?
- Do you have difficulty concentrating?
- Do you “numb out” so you don’t feel anything?
- Do you startle and get jumpy easily?
- Do you keep a watchful eye out for danger?
- Do you have problems sleeping?
- Do you get angry easily?
- Have you missed work/school or appointments since the incident?
- Have you noticed a decline in school or job performance since the incident?
- Have you experienced these reactions for over a month?

If you answered “yes” to most of these questions, you may be experiencing Post Traumatic Stress. Not everyone experiencing Post Traumatic Stress has been through a dangerous event. Some people develop Post Traumatic Stress after a friend or family member has experienced danger or harm. The sudden, unexpected death of a loved one can also lead to Post Traumatic Stress.

Some resilience factors that may reduce the risk of PTSD include:

- Seeking out support from other people, such as friends and family.
- Finding a support group after a traumatic event.
- Learning to feel good about one’s own actions in the face of danger.
- Having a positive coping strategy, or a way of getting through the bad event and learning from it.
- Being able to act and respond effectively despite feeling fear.
-

If you think you have Post Traumatic Stress or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, there is help.

- Both counseling, new treatment approaches, and prescribed medications have been proven useful in treatment.
- Let yourself feel your fear – in small doses. Remember. What happened to you, happened in the past.
- Set a sleep routine and follow it.
- Join a peer support group of individuals who have experienced similar situations (crime victims, veterans, first responders, etc.)
- Seek spiritual and pastoral support from within your faith or house of worship.
- Get counseling from trained trauma specialists. Ask potential treatment specialists about their training and credentials. And make sure your treatment specialist is experienced in working with victims and survivors of traumatic events.

Contributions by Chrys J. Harris, PhD., Mary Beth Williams, PhD.,
The National Institute for Mental Health, the National Center for PTSD,
and the Greenville Mental Health Center, Greenville, SC