

How to Recognize Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Older Adults

How can you support someone afflicted with PTSD?

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An Overview of Post-Traumatic Disorder

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is to not be taken lightly. It affects between 1.5% and 4% of older adults over the age of sixty in communities, presenting within two weeks and lasting up to nine months after the onset of a traumatic event. PTSD presents during times of extreme distress when one is triggered by something reminding them of the trauma.

According to a research study conducted by SeniorLiving.org, between 7% and 15% of adults experience some level of PTSD though not meeting the full criteria. Additionally, “approximately 70% of older men reported lifetime exposure to trauma, while older women reported a lower rate of about 41%” (<https://www.seniorliving.org/research/ptsd-aging-adults/>).

As such, the pandemic has made it more imperative for us to check in on our aging population, especially vulnerable members of our communities.

What causes the onset of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

The onset of PTSD often occurs with major life events. However, unlike the typical celebrations, PTSD is set off by traumatic events. These adverse experiences include the following:

- Neglect
- Death of a Loved One
- Chronic Health Conditions
- Violent events, Abuse, or Assault
- Natural Disasters or Catastrophic Events

How does PTSD differ between young and adult populations?

Though, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder presents differently in each person, the typical signs and symptoms consist of the following:

- Loss of appetite
- Difficulty sleeping
- Anxiety or depression
- Difficulty concentrating
- Persistent feelings of fear
- Loss if interest in activities
- Detachment from friends or family

In adults, however, older adults tend to experience the above PTSD symptoms in conjunction with other major health conditions whether medical, psychiatric, or cognitive. This magnifies their need for emotional and psychological help.

How can you support an older adult afflicted with PTSD?

The symptoms one experiences with PTSD can be as traumatic to them as the event of onset. It is essential to manage someone afflicted with PTSD with great care and to get them professional help. There are four main types of traditional therapy for treating PTSD in older adults including:

- **Cognitive Therapy:** reevaluating a memory
- **Prolonged Exposure:** coping with a memory
- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy:** changing one's reaction to a memory
- **Cognitive Processing Therapy:** changing one's beliefs about the traumatic event

According to Lisa M. Brown, PhD. (School of Aging Studies, University of South Florida), in addition to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, one can intervene and treat trauma in older adults with two methods: Psychological First Aid and Skills for Psychological Recovery.

Psychological First Aid involves reducing the stress surrounding the trauma. Components of this method include:

1. Safety and comfort
2. Stabilization
3. Information gathering regarding current needs and concerns
4. Practical assistance
5. Information on coping
6. Linkage them with collaborative services

Skills for Psychological Recovery involves helping to restore the individual's sense of control.

Outside of traditional therapies, you can support someone with PTSD in the following ways:

1. Be patient and understanding
2. Help manage medications
3. Look for support groups
4. Look into non-traditional treatments and coping methods
5. Be aware any cognitive or psychological medical condition

RESOURCES

- A. <https://www.seniorliving.org/research/ptsd-aging-adults/>
- B. <https://www.caringseniorservice.com/blog/ptsd-seniors>
- C. <https://www.psychiatrictimes.com/view/ptsd-late-life-special-issues>
- D. https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/specific/assess_tx_older_adults.asp
- E. <https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/symptoms>
- F. <https://www.kennedykrieger.org/sites/default/files/library/documents/patient-care/centers-and-programs/traumatic-stress-center/assessing-intervening-and-treating-traumatized-older-adults.pdf>