

What Is PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder is an anxiety disorder that develops in response to a traumatic event. (1) Some people witness the event directly, while others develop PTSD after witnessing something traumatic, such as a violent crime or auto accident. In any given year, approximately 12 million American adults have PTSD, making it one of the most common mental health conditions. (2)

About 6% of the general population will develop PTSD at some point in their lives. The disorder is even more common in veterans, affecting anywhere from 11% to 15% of former military personnel. (3) Veterans who served in the Vietnam War tend to have higher rates of post-traumatic stress than veterans of Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom, and Operation Desert Storm.

Some people with PTSD experience repeated trauma, leading them to develop what some researchers refer to as complex PTSD. Chronic trauma leads to difficulty regulating emotions, distorted self-perception, poor relations with others, and additional symptoms that aren't associated with traditional PTSD. (4)

What Causes PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress is triggered by a traumatic event or series of events. During the event, the affected individual typically feels that their life is at risk or that they're in some type of physical or emotional danger. Some of the most common triggers include sexual assault, domestic violence, natural disasters, and bullying. (5) PTSD also occurs in people who've been in serious auto accidents or experienced some type of medical trauma, such as emergency surgery or the sudden need for intubation. (6)

PTSD can develop in anyone who experiences or witnesses a traumatic event, but it's especially common in service members. In combat zones, military personnel may witness multiple traumatic events in a single deployment. For example, a soldier may witness several deaths due to the detonation of an explosive device. Military sexual trauma is also associated with an increased risk of developing PTSD. (3) This term refers to any type of sexual harassment or sexual assault that occurs while someone is in the military.

What Are the Symptoms of PTSD? Signs to Know

PTSD causes four types of symptoms: intrusion, avoidance, changes in mood and cognition, and changes in arousal and reactivity. (7) Intrusion refers to the intrusive thoughts that occur in some people with PTSD. These thoughts may take the form of nightmares, flashbacks, or involuntary memories.

Avoidance refers to a person's attempts to avoid reminders of the triggering event. Someone with PTSD may avoid people, places, things, and activities that they associate with their trauma. In some cases, avoidance makes it difficult to maintain positive family relationships, as the person with PTSD may be unwilling to visit a loved one's home or participate in activities that other family members enjoy.

The term cognition refers to the processes involved in learning, thinking, perceiving, and remembering things. (8) Some people with PTSD are unable to remember details about the traumatic event or engage in distorted thinking related to the event. These are examples of the changes in cognition associated with a history of trauma. PTSD may also cause bouts of anger or other mood changes, increasing stress for other household members.

Arousal and reactivity PTSD symptoms may lead to increased stress. Examples of these signs of PTSD include startling easily, feeling "on edge," engaging in risky behavior, and having difficulty sleeping or concentrating. (7)

How Do I Know If I Have PTSD? How Is PTSD Diagnosed?

Mental health professionals use rating scales and questionnaires to determine if an individual meets the diagnostic criteria for PTSD disorder. (9) The Department of Veterans Affairs cites the Clinician-Administered PTSD Scale for DSM-5 as the "gold standard" for determining if someone currently has PTSD or had PTSD in the past, but some clinicians use the PTSD Symptom Scale Interview or other diagnostic tools. (10)

To receive a diagnosis of PTSD, an individual must have at least one intrusion symptom, three avoidance symptoms, one change in mood or cognition, and two changes in arousal and reactivity. (9) The changes must last for a minimum of one month and affect the person's ability to perform their normal daily activities.

What Is the Best Treatment for PTSD?

The American Psychological Association strongly recommends cognitive behavioral therapy as an effective PTSD treatment. (11) CBT is a form of talk therapy that focuses on addressing the harmful emotions, behaviors, and thoughts that make it difficult to function in daily life. The goal of CBT is to develop healthier thought patterns and turn negative behaviors into positive ones.

Prolonged exposure, cognitive therapy, and cognitive reprocessing therapy are also used to treat PTSD. All three approaches are based on the principles of CBT, as they aim to change the way people think about and react to their trauma. Additionally, some people benefit from using PTSD medication to manage their symptoms.

How to Cope With a PTSD Diagnosis

One of the best ways to cope with a PTSD diagnosis is to follow the recommended treatment plan as closely as possible. This may include taking daily medication, attending weekly therapy appointments, or seeking inpatient treatment. Individuals with PTSD should prioritize self-care. Eating a well-balanced diet, getting plenty of physical activity, and avoiding alcohol can all help reduce stress. (12)

It's also important for people with PTSD to stay connected with their loved ones. Parents, siblings, spouses, and friends can all provide much-needed encouragement. For individuals without strong family support, it may be helpful to find a support group and attend regular meetings.

How to Help Someone With PTSD

Some people find comfort in sharing their experiences with others, while others prefer to have more privacy. Loved ones can help by offering to listen and then allowing the person with PTSD to decide if and when they want to talk. (13) PTSD has an impact on the whole family, as it can cause irritability, angry outbursts, and other mood changes. When these symptoms occur, it's important for loved ones to use positive language and remind the person with PTSD of their support.

Sources

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