

What is post-traumatic stress disorder?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a debilitating condition caused by a terrifying event. Someone with PTSD feels emotionally numb and has persistent, frightening thoughts and memories of his or her ordeal. PTSD, first brought to public attention by war veterans, can result from a variety of traumatic incidents. These include:

- Kidnapping
- Serious accidents
- Natural disasters
- Violent attacks, such as a mugging, rape or torture

The triggering event may be something that the patient actually experienced or merely witnessed. PTSD can occur at any age.

Depression, substance abuse and anxiety can accompany PTSD. Individuals suffering from PTSD may become easily irritated or have violent outbursts. In severe cases, individuals may have trouble working or socializing. They also may have sleep problems, feel detached or numb and startle easily. Sufferers may lose interest in activities they used to enjoy or have trouble feeling affectionate.

For PTSD sufferers, seeing things that remind them of the incident may be very distressing, leading them to avoid certain places or situations that bring back those memories. Anniversaries of the event often are very difficult to handle. In general, the symptoms of PTSD seem to be worse if the traumatic event was initiated by a person, such as a rape, as opposed to an event, like a flood.

Ordinary events can serve as reminders of the trauma and trigger flashbacks. A flashback may make the person lose touch with the reality and re-enact the event for a period of seconds, hours or even days. A person having a flashback usually believes that the traumatic event is happening all over again.

Most PTSD sufferers' symptoms begin within three months of the trauma. However, occasionally the illness does not show up until years after the traumatic event.

While some people recover within six months, others have symptoms that last much longer. In some cases, the condition may be chronic.

Seek treatment if you or someone you know has symptoms of PTSD. A visit to the family physician is usually the best place to start for help. A physician can determine whether the symptoms are due to PTSD, some other medical condition or a combination of factors. For a physician to diagnose PTSD, generally the symptoms must last for more than a month. Usually, a physician will refer the patient to a counselor, therapist or mental health professional.

Psychotherapy, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, is an integral part of treatment. Being exposed to a reminder of the trauma, such as returning to the scene of a rape, sometimes helps as well.

Support from family and friend can help speed recovery, while antidepressants and anxiety-reducing medications can ease the symptoms of depression and sleep problems.

Resources

- National center for PTSD: [Http://www.ptsd.va.gov/](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/)
- National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov
- American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress: <http://aaets.org>

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