

## Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave or physical harm occurred or was threatened. Traumatic events that may trigger PTSD include violent personal assaults, natural human-caused disasters, accidents or military combat.

Many people with PTSD repeatedly re-experience the ordeal in the form of flashback episodes, memories, nightmares or frightening thoughts. Group therapy sessions and treatment with some medications have proven successful in treating PTSD.

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### Cause

People who experience distressing, painful or sad events are candidates for developing post-traumatic stress disorder. Among those who may experience PTSD are:

- Military troops who served in the Vietnam and Gulf Wars
- Rescue workers involved in the aftermath of natural and man-made disasters
- Survivors of accidents, rape, physical abuse, sexual abuse and other crimes
- Immigrants fleeing violence in their countries
- Survivors of the earthquakes, hurricanes, flood and other natural disasters
- People who witness traumatic events

Family members of victims also can develop the disorder. PTSD can occur in people of any age, including children and adolescents.

## Frequency of Occurrence

Government research indicates the following facts about post-traumatic stress disorder:

- An estimated 7.7 million American adults 18 to 54 (or approximately 3.6 percent of people in this age group in a given year) have PTSD.
- About 30 percent of Vietnam Veterans developed PTSD at some point after the war. The disorder also has been detected among veterans of the Afghanistan War (Enduring Freedom) and Iraq War (Iraqi Freedom), with some estimates running as high as 11 and 20 percent respectively.
- More than twice as many women as men experience PTSD following exposure to trauma.
- Depression, alcohol or other substance abuse, and anxiety disorders frequently co-occur with PTSD. The likelihood of treatment success is increased when these other conditions are appropriately diagnosed and treated as well.

## Symptoms

Many people with PTSD repeatedly re-experience the ordeal in the form of flashback episodes, memories, nightmares or frightening thoughts, especially when they are exposed to events or objects reminiscent of the trauma. Anniversaries of the event can also trigger symptoms.

People with PTSD also experience:

- Emotional numbness
- Sleep disturbances
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Outbursts of anger
- Feelings of intense guilt
- Loss of interest in activities they once enjoyed

Most people with PTSD try to avoid any reminders or thoughts of the ordeal. PTSD may be diagnosed when the above symptoms last more than one month.

Physical symptoms of PTSD include:

- Headaches
- Gastrointestinal distress
- Immune system problems
- Dizziness
- Chest pain or discomfort in other parts of the body

Often, doctors treat these symptoms without being aware that they stem from PTSD.

## Treatment

Post-traumatic stress disorder can be extremely debilitating. Fortunately, research has led to the development of treatments to help people with PTSD.

Studies have demonstrated the efficacy of cognitive-behavioral therapy and group therapy. Exposure therapy, during which the person gradually and repeatedly re-lives the frightening experience under controlled conditions, has also been found to help him or her work through the trauma. Stress inoculation therapy can also help relieve symptoms by educating the person on anxiety control and reduction.

Studies also have found that several types of medication, particularly the selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor and other antidepressants, can help relieve the symptoms of PTSD.

Other research shows that giving people an opportunity to talk about their experiences very soon after a catastrophic event may reduce some of the symptoms of PTSD.

## Resources

- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH): [www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

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