

# Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

 [mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder](https://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder)

If you have gone through a traumatic experience, it is normal to feel lots of emotions, such as distress, fear, helplessness, guilt, shame or anger. You may start to feel better after days or weeks, but sometimes, these feelings don't go away. If the symptoms last for more than a month, you may have **post-traumatic stress disorder** or PTSD.

*"Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can occur following the experience or witnessing of a traumatic event. A traumatic event is a life-threatening event such as military combat, natural disasters, terrorist incidents, serious accidents, or physical or sexual assault in adult or childhood." [1]*

PTSD is a real problem and can happen at any age. If you have PTSD, you are not alone. It affects over 14 million American adults (4.4% of the adult population) in any given year. [2]

## Who can get PTSD?

- Anyone who was a victim, witnessed or has been exposed to a life-threatening situation.
- Survivors of violent acts, such as domestic violence, rape, sexual, physical and/or verbal abuse or physical attacks.
- Survivors of unexpected dangerous events, such as a car accident, natural disaster, or terrorist attack.
- Combat veterans or civilians exposed to war.
- People who have learned of or experienced an unexpected and sudden death of a friend or relative.
- Emergency responders who help victims during traumatic events.
- Children who are neglected and/or abused (physically, sexually or verbally).

## What are the symptoms of PTSD?

For many people, symptoms begin almost right away after the trauma happens. For others, the symptoms may not begin or may not become a problem until years later. Symptoms of PTSD may include:

- **Repeatedly thinking about the trauma.** You may find that thoughts about the trauma come to mind even when you don't want them to. You might also have nightmares or flashbacks about the trauma or may become upset when something reminds you of the event.
- **Being constantly alert or on guard.** You may be easily startled or angered, irritable or anxious and preoccupied with staying safe. You may also find it hard to concentrate or sleep or have physical problems, like constipation, diarrhea, rapid breathing, muscle tension or rapid heart rate.
- **Avoiding reminders of the trauma.** You may not want to talk about the event or be around people or places that remind you of the event. You also may feel emotionally numb, detached from friends and family, and lose interest in activities.

These are other symptoms of PTSD:

- **Panic attacks:** a feeling of intense fear, with shortness of breath, dizziness, sweating, nausea and racing heart.

- **Physical symptoms:** chronic pain, headaches, stomach pain, diarrhea, tightness or burning in the chest, muscle cramps or low back pain.
- **Feelings of mistrust:** losing trust in others and thinking the world is a dangerous place.
- **Problems in daily living:** having problems functioning in your job, at school, or in social situations.
- **Substance abuse:** using drugs or alcohol to cope with the emotional pain.
- **Relationship problems:** having problems with intimacy, or feeling detached from your family and friends.
- **Depression:** persistent sad, anxious or empty mood; loss of interest in once-enjoyed activities; feelings of guilt and shame; or hopelessness about the future. Other symptoms of depression may also develop.
- **Suicidal thoughts:** thoughts about taking one's own life. If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, **chat online** at <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/> or call **1-800-273-TALK** (8255).

## How can I feel better?

PTSD can be treated with success. Treatment and support are critical to your recovery. Although your memories won't go away, you can learn how to manage your response to these memories and the feelings they bring up. You can also reduce the frequency and intensity of your reactions. The following information may be of help to you.

**Psychotherapy.** Although it may seem painful to face the trauma you went through, doing so with the help of a mental health professional can help you get better. There are different types of therapy.

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy** helps you change the thought patterns that keep you from overcoming your anxiety.
- During **exposure therapy**, you work with a mental health professional to help you confront the memories and situations that cause your distress.
- **Cognitive Processing Therapy** helps you process your emotions about the traumatic event and learn how to challenge your thinking patterns.
- **Psychodynamic psychotherapy** focuses on identifying current life situations that set off traumatic memories and worsen PTSD symptoms.[3]
- During **Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing**, you think about the trauma while the therapist waves a hand or baton in front of you. You follow the movements with your eyes. This helps your brain process your memories and reduce your negative feelings about the memories.
- **Couples counseling and family therapy** helps couples and family members understand each other.

**Medicine**, such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors or SSRIs, is used to treat the symptoms of PTSD. It lowers anxiety and depression and helps with other symptoms. Sedatives can help with sleep problems. Anti-anxiety medicine may also help.

**Self-care.** Recovering from PTSD is an ongoing process. But there are healthy steps you can take to help you recover and stay well. Discover which ones help you feel better and add them to your life.

- **Connect with friends and family.** It's easy to feel alone when you've been through a trauma and are not feeling well. But isolation can make you feel worse. Talking to your friends and family can help you get the support you need. Studies show that having meaningful social and family connections in your life can have a positive impact on your health and healing.[4]

- **Relax.** Each person has his or her own ways to relax. They may include listening to soothing music, reading a book or taking a walk. You can also relax by deep breathing, yoga, meditation or massage therapy. Avoid using drugs, alcohol or smoking to relax.
- **Exercise.** Exercise relieves your tense muscles, improves your mood and sleep, and boosts your energy and strength. In fact, research shows that exercise can ease symptoms of anxiety and depression.[5] Try to do a physical activity three to five days a week for 30 minutes each day. If this is too long for you, try to exercise for 10 to 15 minutes to get started.
- **Get enough rest.** Getting enough sleep helps you cope with your problems better, lowers your risk for illness and helps you recover from the stresses of the day. Try to get seven to nine hours of sleep each night. Visit the Sleep Foundation at [www.sleepfoundation.org](http://www.sleepfoundation.org) for tips on getting a better night's sleep.
- **Keep a journal.** Writing down your thoughts can be a great way to work through issues. Researchers have found that writing about painful events can reduce stress and improve health.[6]
- **Refrain from using drugs and alcohol.** Although using drugs and alcohol may seem to help you cope, it can make your symptoms worse, delay your treatment and recovery, and can cause abuse or addiction problems.
- **Limit caffeine.** In some people, caffeine can trigger anxiety. Caffeine may also disturb your sleep.
- **Help others.** Reconnect to your community by volunteering. Research shows that volunteering builds social networks, improves self-esteem and can provide a sense of purpose and achievement.
- **Limit TV watching.** If watching the news or other programs bothers you, limit the amount of time you watch. Try not to listen to disturbing news before going to sleep. It might keep you from falling asleep right away.

## Helping a Family Member With PTSD

If someone in your family has PTSD, it can be a hard time for family members too. Your loved one with PTSD may have symptoms that interfere with your relationship and change family life. If your loved one has PTSD, you may also be coping with these difficult feelings:

- Depressed or angry about the changes in family life.
- Fearful if your loved one is angry or aggressive.
- Reluctant to talk about the trauma or avoiding situations that might upset your loved one.
- Angry or resentful toward your loved one.
- Tired from sleep problems because of worry, depression or because of your loved one's sleep problems.
- Isolated if your partner refuses to socialize.
- Emotional distance from your partner.

The stress of PTSD can affect all members of the family. If PTSD is affecting your family, consider contacting a mental health professional for individual, couples or family counseling. Through counseling, you can get the help you and your family needs to cope and support each other. For a referral to local services, contact your local Mental Health America organization or Mental Health America at 800-969-6642. You can also visit use MHA's [online affiliate locator](#).

## Other Resources

### National Suicide Prevention Lifeline

1-800-273-TALK (8255)

<http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>

**Freedom from Fear (FFF)**

Phone: (718) 351-1717

[www.freedomfromfear.org](http://www.freedomfromfear.org)

**Gift from Within (GFW)**

Phone: (207) 236-8858

[www.giftfromwithin.org](http://www.giftfromwithin.org)

**International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS)**

Phone: (847) 480- 9028

[www.istss.org](http://www.istss.org)

**National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (NCPTSD)**

Phone: (802) 296-5132

<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/>

**National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC)**

Phone: (202) 467-8700

[www.ncvc.org](http://www.ncvc.org)

**Screening for Mental Health (For Military)**

Phone: (781) 239-0071

[www.militarymentalhealth.org](http://www.militarymentalhealth.org)

**Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)**

Phone: (800)-789-2647

<http://www.samhsa.gov/veterans-military-families>

**The Sidran Traumatic Stress Institute**

Phone: (410) 825-8888

[www.sidran.org](http://www.sidran.org)

**Witness Justice**

Phone: (800) 495-4957

[www.witnessjustice.org](http://www.witnessjustice.org)

**The PTSD brochure was reviewed by David S. Riggs, Ph.D., Executive Director, Center for Deployment Psychology, Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences.**

**Sources**

[1] National Center for PTSD, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. What is posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?, [http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact\\_shts/fs\\_what\\_is\\_ptsd.html](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/ncmain/ncdocs/fact_shts/fs_what_is_ptsd.html).

[2] Kessler, R. C., Petukhova, M., Sampson, N. A., Zaslavsky, A. M., & Wittchen, H.-U. (2012). Twelve-month and lifetime prevalence and lifetime morbid risk of anxiety and mood disorders in the United States. *International Journal of Methods in Psychiatric Research*, 21(3), 169–184. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22865617>

[3] National Center for PTSD, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. Treatment of PTSD, [http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts/treatment/fs\\_treatment.html](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts/treatment/fs_treatment.html).

[4] Chapman L, Lesch, N & Aiken S. (2005). Is resilience in your future? WELCOA Special Report. Wellness

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[6] Smyth JM, Hockemeyer J, Anderson C, Strandberg K, Koch M, O'Neill HK, & McCammon S. (2002). Structured writing about a natural disaster buffers the effect of intrusive thoughts on negative affect and physical symptoms. *The Australasian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies*. Online at <http://www.massey.ac.nz/~trauma/issues/2002-1/smyth.htm>.

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