

## What is PTSD and what causes it?

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Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can occur after someone experiences a traumatic event that caused intense fear, helplessness, or horror. PTSD can result from personally experienced traumas (e.g., rape, war, natural disasters, abuse, serious accidents, and captivity) or from the witnessing or learning of a violent or tragic event.

While it is common to experience a brief state of anxiety or depression after such occurrences, people with PTSD continually re-experience the traumatic event; avoid individuals, thoughts, or situations associated with the event; and have symptoms of excessive emotions. People with this disorder have these symptoms for longer than one month and cannot function as well as they did before the traumatic event. PTSD symptoms usually appear within three months of the traumatic experience; however, they sometimes occur months or even years later.

## What are the symptoms of PTSD?

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Although the symptoms for individuals with PTSD can vary considerably, they generally fall into three categories:

- **Re-experience**—Individuals with PTSD often experience recurrent and intrusive recollections of and/or nightmares about the stressful event. Some may experience flashbacks, hallucinations, or other vivid feelings of the event happening again. Others experience great psychological or physiological distress when certain things (objects, situations, etc.) remind them of the event.

- **Avoidance**—Many with PTSD will persistently avoid things that remind them of the traumatic event. This can result in avoiding everything from thoughts, feelings, or conversations associated with the incident to activities, places, or people that cause them to recall the event. In others there may be a general lack of responsiveness signaled by an inability to recall aspects of the trauma, a decreased interest in formerly important activities, a feeling of detachment from others, a limited range of emotion, and/or feelings of hopelessness about the future.
- **Increased emotional arousal**—Symptoms in this area may include difficulty falling or staying asleep, irritability or outbursts of anger, difficulty concentrating, becoming very alert or watchful, and/or jumpiness or being easily startled.

It is important to note that those with PTSD often use alcohol or other drugs in an attempt to self-medicate. Individuals with this disorder may also be at an increased risk for suicide.

## How is PTSD treated?

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There are a variety of treatments for PTSD, and individuals respond to treatments differently.

PTSD often can be treated effectively with psychotherapy or medication or both.

Behavior therapy focuses on learning relaxation and coping techniques. This therapy often increases the patient's exposure to a feared situation as a way of making him or her gradually less sensitive to it. Cognitive therapy is therapy that helps people with PTSD take a close look at

his or her thought patterns, while teaching them to do less negative and nonproductive thinking. Group therapy helps for many people with PTSD by having them get to know others who have had similar situations and learning that their fears and feelings are not uncommon.

Medication is often used along with psychotherapy. Antidepressant and anti-anxiety medications may help lessen symptoms of PTSD such as sleep problems (insomnia or nightmares), depression, and edginess.

## What Can I Do if I Think I Have PTSD?

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If you think you have PTSD, it's important to get assessed by a professional. Only a trained provider can determine if you have PTSD. If you think you may have PTSD, talk to your doctor or a mental health provider. Treatment can work, and early treatment may help reduce long-term symptoms.

If you think you have PTSD:

- Talk to your family doctor.
- Talk to a mental health professional, such as a therapist.
- If you're a Veteran, contact your local VA hospital or Vet Center.
- Talk to a close friend or family member. He or she may be able to support you and find you help.
- Talk to a religious leader.
- Fill out a PTSD questionnaire or screen (see below).
- Learn more about talking to your doctor about trauma.

## Take a Self-Screen for PTSD

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A screen is a brief set of questions to tell you if it is likely you might have PTSD.

Below is the Primary Care-PTSD Screen.

In your life, have you ever had any experience that was so frightening, horrible, or upsetting that, in the past month, you:

1. Have had nightmares about it or thought about it when you did not want to?
2. Tried hard not to think about it or went out of your way to avoid situations that reminded you of it?
3. Were constantly on guard, watchful, or easily startled?
4. Felt numb or detached from others, activities, or your surroundings?

If you answer “yes” to any three items, you should think about seeing a doctor for an assessment.

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# Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

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