

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder—What It Is and What It Means to You

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a type of anxiety problem. It can happen after your life is threatened or you see a traumatic event. Usually, the event makes you feel very afraid or helpless. Some examples of the events are war, rape, or a severe car crash.

Who gets PTSD?

Whether you'll get PTSD depends partly on how long, severe and intense the trauma was. People who've had anxiety, depression or other mental disorders are more likely to develop PTSD. People who've been victims of previous trauma are also at greater risk.

What are the symptoms of PTSD?

You can have symptoms right after the trauma or they can happen months or even years later. They fall into three groups: reliving the trauma, trying to stop thinking about the trauma and anything related to it, and feeling "on edge." You may have flashbacks, nightmares, bad memories or hallucinations. You may try not to think about the trauma, or stay away from people who remind you of it. You may not be able to recall parts of the event. You may feel emotionally numb, or you may feel detached from others. You may have trouble sleeping, be irritable, angry or jumpy. People with PTSD are often depressed. Sometimes people try to feel better with alcohol or drugs, which can cause abuse or addiction problems.

How is PTSD diagnosed?

Your doctor can diagnose PTSD by talking with you about your symptoms and experiences.

How is PTSD treated?

There are many treatments available. Medicines for depression or anxiety are often helpful. Talking to a mental health professional can also help. PTSD can cause depression and substance abuse. These problems should be treated before or during PTSD treatment. You can prevent PTSD by talking about the event and your feelings.

How long does it last?

PTSD can be treated successfully, but without treatment, it can last several months to many years, depending on the type of the event and your feelings about it.

What can I do to help myself recover?

- Check for support groups in your area.
- Contact the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI), or other groups where you can meet people who've had PTSD. NAMI's toll-free number is 1-800-950-NAMI. Their Web site address is <http://www.nami.org>.
- Learn all about PTSD and work with your doctor or therapist to get better.

This information provides a general overview and may not apply to everyone. Talk to your family doctor to find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on this subject. Copyright© 2000 American Academy of Family Physicians. Permission is granted to reproduce this material for nonprofit educational uses. Written permission is required for all other uses, including electronic uses.

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