

## Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a debilitating condition that can occur after exposure to a terrifying event. Often, people with PTSD have constant frightening thoughts and memories of their ordeal. People with PTSD may be emotionally numb, especially around people they were once close to.

PTSD can result from any type of traumatic incident. This includes serious accidents such as car or train wrecks, natural disasters such as floods or earthquakes, violent attacks such as a mugging, rape, torture, or being kidnapped or held captive. The event that triggers it may be something that threatened the person's life or the life of someone close to him or her. Or it could be something witnessed, such as mass destruction after a plane crash.

### How Common is PTSD?

At least 3.6% of U.S. adults (5.2 million Americans) have PTSD during the course of a year. About 30% of the men and women who have spent time in war zones experience PTSD. One million war veterans developed PTSD after serving in Vietnam. PTSD has also been detected among veterans of the Persian Gulf War, with some estimates running as high as 8%.

### What Are the Symptoms of PTSD?

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 and sleep disturbances
- depression
- anxiety and irritability
- outbursts of anger
- feelings of intense guilt

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

Not every traumatized person gets full-blown PTSD or develops PTSD at all. In those who do have PTSD, symptoms usually begin within 3 months of the trauma and the course of the illness varies. Some people recover within 6 months, others have symptoms that last much longer. In some cases the condition may be chronic. Occasionally, the illness doesn't show up until years after the traumatic event.

### What Treatments Are Available for PTSD?

Fortunately, effective treatments have been developed to help people with PTSD. Research is also helping scientists better understand the condition and how it affects the brain and the rest of the body. Treatment for PTSD includes

- cognitive-behavioral therapy
- group psychotherapy
- medications (including antidepressants)

Exposure treatment has also been effective in treating people with PTSD. This involves using guided imagery and relaxation techniques to mentally revisit the trauma in manageable steps and under controlled conditions. The aim is to facilitate the processing of the trauma. Through treatment, people with PTSD can live a normal life and move beyond the constant pain of reliving a traumatic experience.

### **Do Other Physical or Emotional Illnesses Tend to Accompany PTSD?**

Depression, alcohol or other substance abuse, or anxiety disorders are not uncommon co-occurrences for people with PTSD. The likelihood of treatment success is increased when these other conditions are appropriately diagnosed and treated as well. Headaches, gastrointestinal complaints, immune system problems, dizziness, chest pain, or discomfort in other parts of the body are also common. Often, doctors treat the symptoms without being aware that they stem from PTSD. When PTSD is diagnosed, referral to a mental health professional that has had experience treating people with the disorder is recommended.

### **Who Is Most Likely to Develop PTSD?**

People who have been abused as children or who have had other previous traumatic experiences are more likely to develop the disorder. Research is continuing to pinpoint other factors that may lead to PTSD.

### **What Are Scientists Learning From Research?**

Research has shown that PTSD clearly alters a number of fundamental brain mechanisms. Because of this, abnormalities have been detected in brain chemicals that mediate coping behavior, learning, and memory among people with the disorder. Recent brain imaging studies have detected altered metabolism and blood flow as well as anatomical changes in people with PTSD.

### **The following are also recent research findings:**

- Some studies show that debriefing people very soon after a catastrophic event may reduce some of the symptoms of PTSD. A study of 12,000 schoolchildren who lived through a hurricane in Hawaii found that those who got counseling early on were doing much better two years later than those who did not.
- People with PTSD tend to have abnormal levels of key hormones involved in response to stress. Cortisol levels are lower than normal and epinephrine and norepinephrine are higher than normal. Scientists have also found that people with this condition have alterations in the function of the thyroid and in neurotransmitter activity involving serotonin and opiates.
- When people are in danger, they produce high levels of natural opiates, which can temporarily mask pain. Scientists have found that people with PTSD continue to produce those higher levels even after the danger has passed; this may lead to the blunted emotions associated with the condition.
- It used to be believed that people who tend to dissociate themselves from a trauma were showing a healthy response, but now some researchers suspect that people who experience dissociation may be more prone to PTSD.
- Animal studies show that the hippocampus -- a part of the brain critical to emotion-laden memories -- appears to be smaller in cases of PTSD. Brain imaging studies indicate similar findings in humans. Scientists are investigating whether this is related to short-term memory problems. Changes in the hippocampus are thought to be responsible for intrusive memories and flashbacks that occur in people with this disorder.
- Research to understand the neurotransmitter system involved in memories of emotionally charged events may lead to discovery of drugs that, if given early, could block the development of PTSD symptoms.
- Levels of CRF, or corticotropin releasing factor -- the ignition switch in the human stress response -- seem to be elevated in people with PTSD, which may account for the tendency to be easily startled. Because of this finding, scientists now want to determine whether drugs that reduce CRF activity are useful in treating the disorder.

## **Resources Are Available**

Additional information, self-help tools and other resources are available online at [www.FOH4YOU.com](http://www.FOH4YOU.com). Or call us for more information, help and support. Counselors are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to provide confidential assistance at no cost to you.



## **Employee Assistance Program**

*We Care, Just Call*

**1-800-222-0364**

1-888-262-7848 TTY Users

[www.FOH4YOU.com](http://www.FOH4YOU.com)

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