

POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Definition

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a type of anxiety disorder that's triggered by an extremely traumatic event. You can develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) when a traumatic event happens to you or when you see a traumatic event happen to someone else.

Many people who are involved in traumatic events or witness them have a brief period of difficulty adjusting and coping. But with time and some healthy coping methods, such traumatic reactions usually get better on their own. In some cases, though, the symptoms can get worse or last for months or even years. Sometimes, they may even completely disrupt your life. In these cases, you may have post-traumatic stress disorder.

Post-traumatic stress disorder may affect survivors of such traumatic events as sexual or physical assault, war, torture, a natural disaster or an airplane crash. Post-traumatic stress disorder also can affect rescue workers at the site of mass casualties or other tragedies. These kinds of events may cause intense fear, helplessness or horror.

It's important to get treatment as soon as possible to help prevent PTSD from getting worse.

Symptoms

Signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder typically begin within three months of a traumatic event. In a small number of cases, though, PTSD symptoms may not occur until years after the event.

Post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms may include:

- Flashbacks, or reliving the traumatic event for minutes or even days at a time
- Shame or guilt
- Upsetting dreams about the traumatic event
- Trying to avoid thinking or talking about the traumatic event
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Irritability or anger
- Poor relationships
- Self-destructive behavior, such as drinking too much
- Hopelessness about the future
- Trouble sleeping
- Memory problems
- Trouble concentrating
- Being easily startled or frightened
- Not enjoying activities you once enjoyed
- Hearing or seeing things that aren't there

Post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms can come and go. You may have more symptoms during times of higher stress or when you experience symbolic reminders of what you went through. For example, some people whose PTSD symptoms had been gone for years saw their symptoms come back again with the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on Sept. 11, 2001.

When you have PTSD, you may relive the traumatic event numerous times. You may have upsetting memories. Or you may see reminders wherever you go. You may hear a car backfire and relive combat experiences, for instance. Or you may see a report on the news about a rape, and feel again the horror and fear of your own assault.

Causes

Researchers are still trying to better understand what causes someone to get post-traumatic stress disorder. As with most mental illnesses, post-traumatic stress disorder is probably caused by a complex mix of:

- Biology and genetics
- Your life experiences
Your temperament
- Changes in the natural chemicals in your brain

Coping and support

If distress caused by a traumatic event affects your life, seeing your health care professional is an important first step. But you can take actions to help yourself cope as you continue with treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder. Things you can do include:

- Follow your health professional's instructions. Although it may take a while to feel benefits from therapy or medications, most people do begin to feel better within a few weeks. Remind yourself that it takes time. Healing won't come overnight. Following your treatment plan will help move you forward.
- Take care of yourself. Get enough rest, eat a balanced diet, exercise and take time to relax. Avoid caffeine and nicotine, which can worsen anxiety.
- Don't self-medicate. Turning to alcohol or drugs to numb your feelings isn't healthy, even though it may be a tempting way to cope. It can lead to more problems down the road and prevent real healing.
- Break the cycle. When you feel anxious, take a brisk walk or delve into a hobby to refocus.
- Talk to someone. Stay connected with supportive and caring family, friends, faith leaders or others. You don't have to talk about what happened, if you don't want to. Just sharing time together with loved ones can offer healing and comfort.
- Consider a support group. Many communities have support groups geared for specific situations. Ask your health care professional for help finding one, look in your local phone book, or contact your community's social services system.
- Make a resolution. For many people, living through a traumatic event becomes a turning point to make positive changes in their lives and grow emotionally and psychologically. For instance, some people who live through a serious car accident caused by someone under the influence of alcohol may resolve to combat drinking and driving.