



Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

It is natural to feel afraid during and after a traumatic situation. This fear triggers many split-second changes in the body to respond to danger now and help avoid it in the future. This “fight-or-flight” response is a typical reaction meant to protect a person from harm. Nearly everyone will experience a range of reactions after trauma, yet most people will recover from those symptoms naturally.

PTSD is a disorder that some people develop after experiencing a shocking, scary, or dangerous event. People who have PTSD may feel stressed or frightened even when they are no longer in danger, continuing to experience symptoms long after a trauma has occurred.

What are the Symptoms of PTSD?

To be diagnosed with PTSD, an adult must have all of the following symptoms for at least one month:

Re-experiencing symptoms (at least one)

- Flashbacks (reliving the trauma over and over, including physical symptoms like a racing heart or sweating)
- Bad dreams
- Frightening thoughts

Re-experiencing symptoms may cause problems in a person’s everyday routine. They can be triggered by a person’s own thoughts and feelings. Words, objects, or situations that are reminders of the event can also trigger re-experiencing symptoms.

Avoidance symptoms (at least one)

- Staying away from places, events, or objects that are reminders of the experience
- Avoiding thoughts or feelings related to the traumatic event

Things or situations that remind a person of the traumatic event can trigger avoidance symptoms. These symptoms may cause a person to change his/her personal routine. For example, after a bad car accident, a person who usually drives may avoid driving or riding in a car.

Arousal & Reactivity symptoms (at least two)

- Being easily startled
- Feeling tense or “on edge”
- Having difficulty sleeping and/or having angry outbursts

Arousal symptoms are usually constant instead of being triggered by something that brings back memories of the traumatic event. They can make a person feel stressed and angry. These symptoms may make it hard to do daily tasks, such as sleeping, eating, or concentrating.

Cognition & Mood symptoms (at least two)

- Trouble remembering key features of the traumatic event
- Negative thoughts about oneself or the world
- Distorted feelings like guilt or blame towards self or others
- Loss of interest in enjoyable activities

Cognition and mood symptoms can begin or worsen after the traumatic event. These symptoms can make the person feel alienated or detached from friends or family members.

Risk and Resilience Factors for PTSD

It is important to remember that not everyone who lives through a traumatic event develops PTSD. Many factors play a part in whether a person will develop PTSD. Some of these are risk factors that make a person more likely to develop PTSD. Other factors, called resilience factors, can help reduce the risk of developing the disorder.

Risk factors for PTSD include:

- Living through dangerous events and traumas
- Getting hurt or seeing other people hurt or killed
- Childhood trauma
- Having little or no social support after the event
- Extra stress after the event, such as loss of a loved one, pain or injury, or loss of a job or home
- Having a history of mental illness or substance abuse

Resilience factors for PTSD include:

- Having support from other people, such as friends and family
- Finding a support group after a traumatic event
- Learning to feel good about one's own actions in the face of danger
- Having a coping strategy, or a way of getting through the bad event and learning from it
- Being able to act and respond effectively despite feeling fear

Helpful Coping Strategies

- **Social support** – Seek out support from family and/or friends. People who surround themselves with close others are likely to cope more effectively with trauma.
- **Grounding techniques** – Remind yourself where you are located. Root your feet firmly into the ground. Touch items around you (e.g., your fuzzy blue sweater; the shiny smooth car key; your ear). Massage your forearm with your hand. Jump up and down five times.
- **Progressive muscle relaxation** – A process of tightening and releasing muscles from head to toe. This technique helps a person tune more into his/her body and increases one's sense of personal control. It also can serve as an effective focus and distraction.
- **Positive self-talk** – Inside your head, or even out loud, coaching yourself in a positive direction can be extremely helpful. Statements such as "I am okay," "I will get through this," "it's just anxiety," "I have handled this successfully before... and I will handle it now," "I am safe," "just breathe," "count backwards by 7 from 100," and/or "this will pass." With consistent practice, one can use favorite statements or mantras in a meditative way, to more quickly bring a sense of calm and relaxation.



Material adapted from <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>



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