



Healing Trauma's Invisible Wounds

Fact Sheet: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

If you have lived through a terrible experience, it is normal to feel lots of emotions, such as distress, fear, helplessness, guilt, shame or anger. You may start to feel better after a few days or weeks, but sometimes, these feelings don't go away. If they last a long time or disrupt your life, you may have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a real problem and can happen at any age, affecting children and nearly eight million American adults.

Who can be affected by PTSD?

- Anyone who was a victim of a life-threatening situation or has been exposed to one.
- Combat veterans or civilians exposed to war.
- Children who are neglected and/or abused (physically, emotionally, sexually or verbally).
- Survivors of violent acts, such as domestic violence, rape, bullying, sexual, physical and/or verbal abuse or physical attacks.
- Survivors of unexpected dangerous events, such as a car accident, natural disaster, or terrorist attack.
- People who have learned of or experienced an unexpected and sudden death of a friend or relative.
- Emergency responders who help victims during traumatic events.

What are the symptoms of PTSD?

For many people, symptoms begin almost right away after the trauma happens. For others, the symptoms may not begin or may not become a problem until years later. Three groups of symptoms define PTSD:

- **Reliving the trauma.** Thoughts about the trauma come to mind even when you don't want them to. You might also have nightmares or flashbacks about the trauma or may become upset when something reminds you of the event.
- **Being constantly on guard or hyper-aroused.** You may be easily startled or angered, irritable or anxious and pre-occupied with staying safe. You may also find it hard to concentrate or sleep or have physical problems.
- **Avoiding reminders of the trauma.** You may not want to talk about the event or be around people or places that remind you of the event. You also may feel emotionally numb, detached from friends and family, and lose interest in activities.

There are also other symptoms:

- **Panic attacks:** a feeling of intense fear, with shortness of breath, dizziness, sweating, nausea and racing heart.
- **Physical symptoms:** chronic pain, headaches, stomach pain, diarrhea, tightness or burning in the chest, muscle cramps or low back pain.
- **Feelings of mistrust:** losing trust in others and thinking the world is a dangerous place.
- **Problems in daily living:** having difficulty functioning in your job, at school, or in social situations.
- **Substance abuse:** using drugs or alcohol to cope with the emotional pain.
- **Relationship problems:** having problems with intimacy, or feeling detached from family and friends.
- **Depression:** persistently sad, anxious or empty mood; loss of interest in once-enjoyed activities; feelings of guilt and shame; or hopelessness about the future. Other symptoms of depression may also develop.
- **Suicidal thoughts:** thoughts about taking one's own life. If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, call 911 or 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

How can I feel better?

PTSD can be treated successfully. Treatment, support and self-care are critical to your recovery. Although your memories won't go away, you can learn to manage your response to them and the feelings they bring up. You can also reduce the frequency and intensity of your reactions. Get evaluated by a mental health professional. If you are diagnosed with PTSD, you can recover with the help of:

Psychotherapy. Although it may seem painful to face the trauma you went through, doing so with the help of a mental health professional can help you get better. Several types of therapy are helpful, including cognitive processing therapy, exposure therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy. Couples counseling and family therapy will help others to understand and support you.

Medicine. such as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors or SSRIs, is used to treat the symptoms of PTSD. It lowers anxiety and depression and helps with other symptoms. Sedatives can help with sleep problems. Anti-anxiety medicine may also help.

Support groups. Talking to other survivors of trauma similar to yours can be a helpful step in your recovery. You can share your thoughts to help resolve your feelings, gain confidence in coping with your memories and symptoms and find comfort in knowing you're not alone. Contact your local Mental Health America affiliate or go to www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/go/find_support_group.

Self-care. Recovering from PTSD is an ongoing process. But there are healthy steps you can take to help you recover and stay well. Discover which ones help you feel better and add them to your life.

Helping a Family Member with PTSD

If PTSD is affecting your family, consider contacting a mental health professional for individual, couples or family counseling. Through counseling, you can get the help you and your family needs to cope and support each other. For a referral to local services, contact your local Mental Health America organization or Mental Health America at 800-969-6642. You can also visit www.mentalhealthamerica.net.

More on PTSD

Mental Health America
www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/ptsd

National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
(802) 296-5132
www.ncptsd.org

Veterans

MHA's Operation Healthy Reunions Military PTSD Information
www.mentalhealthamerica.net/reunions/resources.cfm

Make the Connection: Shared Experiences and Support
<http://maketheconnection.net>

Trauma Survivors

Sidran Institute
888-825-8249
www.sidran.org

Gift from Within
(207) 236-8858
www.giftfromwithin.org

Witness Justice
800-4WJ-HELP
www.witnessjustice.org/index.cfm

National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC)
(202) 467-8700
www.ncvc.org

National Center for Trauma-Informed Care
<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/nctic/trauma.asp>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255)

