

# JUST THE FACTS: PTSD

## UNDERSTANDING POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a condition that can occur after exposure to a traumatic event. A traumatic event is something horrible and scary that you see or that happens to you. During this type of event, you think that your life or others' lives are in danger.

Anyone who experienced a life-threatening event themselves, witnessed one happen to someone else, or learned about a traumatic event occurring to a close family member or friend, can develop PTSD. These events can include:

- Combat exposure
- Child sexual or physical abuse
- Terrorist attacks
- Sexual or physical assault
- Serious accidents, such as a car wreck
- Natural disasters, such as a fire, tornado, hurricane, flood or earthquake

Following exposure to these kinds of events, you may experience some of the symptoms described in this resource. If these symptoms don't go away or they get worse, you may have PTSD. These symptoms may disrupt your life, making it hard to continue with your daily activities.

### How does PTSD develop?

Experiencing a traumatic event can cause strong emotional reactions and thoughts that can result in changes in the brain. Most people who go through a traumatic event have some post-traumatic stress symptoms, yet not everyone will develop PTSD. It isn't clear why some people develop PTSD and others don't. How likely you are to get PTSD depends on many things. These include:

- How intense the trauma was or how long it lasted
- If you lost someone you were close to
- If you or a loved one were physically injured
- How close you were to the event
- How strongly the event affected your emotional reaction and thoughts
- If you felt the event and circumstances were in your control or beyond your control
- How much help and support you had following the event

Most people who develop PTSD eventually get better. However, one out of three people with PTSD continue to experience some symptoms. Even if you continue to have symptoms, treatment can help you cope. Your symptoms don't have to interfere with your everyday activities, work and relationships.

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## What are the symptoms of PTSD?

PTSD symptoms usually start soon after the traumatic event, but they may not happen until months or years later. They also may come and go over many years. If the symptoms last longer than four weeks and cause you distress or interfere with your work or home life, you may have PTSD. Symptoms of PTSD can seem terrifying. They may disrupt your life and make it hard to continue with your daily activities. It may be hard just to get through the day. But remember, there are effective treatments that will help. Recognizing and understanding the symptoms can help.

### There are four types of symptoms:

**Reliving the event (also called re-experiencing symptoms):** Bad memories of the traumatic event can come back at any time. You may feel the same fear and horror you did when the event took place. You may have nightmares. You may even feel like you're going through the event again—this is called a flashback. Sometimes there is a trigger, which is a sound or sight that causes you to relive the event. Triggers might include:

- Hearing a car backfire, fireworks or loud noises which can bring back memories of gunfire and war for a combat veteran
- Seeing a car accident, which can remind a crash survivor of his or her own accident
- Seeing a news report of a sexual assault, which may bring back memories of assault for victims

**Avoiding situations that remind you of the event:** You may try to avoid situations or people that trigger memories of the traumatic event. You may even avoid talking or thinking about the event.

- A person who was in an earthquake may avoid watching television shows or movies that feature earthquakes
- A person who was robbed at gunpoint while ordering at a hamburger drive-in may avoid fast-food restaurants
- Some people may keep very busy or avoid seeking help. This keeps them from having to think or talk about the event

**Negative moods or thoughts:** You may find your moods or thoughts are more negative than usual.

- Loss of interest in activities you used to enjoy
- Forgetting parts of the traumatic event or inability to talk about them
- Negative thoughts about yourself, others or the world
- Difficulty experiencing positive emotions
- Inability to feel positive or loving toward other people and avoiding relationships

**Feeling keyed up (also called hyperarousal):** You may feel jittery, or always alert and on the lookout for danger. This is known as hyperarousal. It can cause you to:

- Suddenly become angry or irritable
- Have a hard time sleeping
- Have trouble concentrating
- Fear for your safety and always feel on guard
- Startle easily



Recognizing and understanding the symptoms can help.



## What are other common problems associated with PTSD?

People with PTSD may also have other problems. These include:

- Drinking or drug abuse
- Feelings of hopelessness, shame or despair
- Employment problems
- Relationship problems including divorce and violence
- Physical symptoms

## Can children have PTSD?

Children can have PTSD too. They may have the symptoms previously described or other symptoms depending on how old they are. As children get older their symptoms are more like those of adults.

Young children may become upset if their parents are not close by, have trouble sleeping, or suddenly have trouble with toilet training or going to the bathroom.

Children who are in the first few years of elementary school (ages 6 to 9) may act out the trauma through play, drawings or stories. They may complain of physical problems or become more irritable or aggressive. They also may develop fears and anxiety not related to the traumatic event.

## What treatments are available?

When you have PTSD, facing the past can be hard. Instead of telling others how you feel, you may keep your feelings bottled up. Treatment can help.

There are many treatments available for PTSD. Cognitive behavioral therapy is one type of counseling. It appears to be the most effective type of counseling for PTSD. There are different types of cognitive behavioral therapies such as cognitive processing therapy and prolonged exposure therapy. A similar kind of therapy called EMDR, or eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, is also a treatment for PTSD. Some medications are effective too.

## Get More Information

For more information about post-traumatic stress and PTSD, visit AfterDeployment [AfterDeployment.dcoe.mil/topics-post-traumatic-stress](https://AfterDeployment.dcoe.mil/topics-post-traumatic-stress)

This information is adapted from National Center for PTSD, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, [ptsd.va.gov](https://ptsd.va.gov)



Treatment can  
help you get  
better.

