

Family therapy. The entire family is affected when a person experiences trauma. A skilled family therapist can help family members provide support for the victim and deal with their own feelings.

Support groups. A support group can be very healing when it includes others who share similar experiences and who struggle with similar problems.

Cognitive behavioral therapy. Supportive psychotherapy is essential for anyone who has experienced trauma. The cognitive behavioral approach is shown to be helpful in treating PTSD symptoms.

Eye movement desensitization reprocessing (EMDR). A fairly new therapeutic tool, EMDR is shown to be effective in treating victims of trauma. A licensed, experienced therapist trained in this technique may be able to relieve the symptoms of PTSD.

Relaxation training. Since many victims of trauma have a difficult time relaxing, special training to promote relaxation may be helpful.

Physical exercise. An active exercise program is an excellent way to relieve stress.

Medication. Antidepressant medications can help relieve symptoms of depression and anxiety, and they also encourage sleep.

WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

National Center for PTSD (NCPTSD.org).

PTSD.com offers free information about PTSD and related disorders.

Rothschild, Babette. *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treat-*

ment. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000.

Wilson, John, Friedman, Matthew, Lindy, Jacob (eds.). *Treating Psychological Trauma and PTSD.* New York: Guilford Press, 2001.

SEE THESE HANDOUTS FOR RELATED TOPICS

Building Your Self-Esteem
Childhood Trauma
Depression
Dissociation
How People Change
Managing Angry Feelings
Managing Anxiety
Phobias, Panic, and Agoraphobia
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Relaxation Techniques
Seeking Spirituality
Sleep Disturbance

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

WHAT IS POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER?

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) develops in response to a traumatic or life-threatening event that is outside the normal range of human experience. It can arise when a person experiences or witnesses an event such as any of the following:

- Sexual abuse
- Rape
- Life-threatening injury or illness
- Murder
- Violence
- Being threatened with a weapon
- Terrorism
- War
- Natural disaster (e.g., tornado, hurricane, earthquake)
- Early and traumatic loss of a parent



People who develop PTSD may have both psychological and physical symptoms. The disorder often occurs in conjunction with conditions such as depression, substance abuse, and memory and thinking problems.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF PTSD?

Some symptoms of PTSD may become apparent right away; other symptoms may be delayed until adulthood. The symptoms of PTSD may last from several months to many years and may include the following:

- Confusion
- Agitation; hyperarousal
- Fear and anxiety
- Feelings of helplessness
- Anger; irritability
- Sadness; depression
- Shock, apathy, or numbness
- Dissociation
- Withdrawal; detachment
- Flashbacks of the event
- Avoidance of specific places and situations
- In children, acting out of the event in play situations
- Nightmares
- Dread of the event happening again
- Fear of imminent death
- Less interest in activities that once were enjoyable
- Headaches, stomachaches, or other physical symptoms
- Insomnia
- Inability to concentrate

HOW IS PTSD DIFFERENT FROM NORMAL REACTIONS TO STRESS?

Not everyone who experiences or witnesses a life-threatening or traumatic act develops PTSD. After such an experience, most people have the symptoms of acute stress—beginning with a sense of numbness or shock and perhaps confusion, sadness, and anxiety. They may also have any of the symptoms in the preceding list. These signs of acute stress are normal. If they disappear within a month, they do not constitute PTSD, but if they worsen and last longer than a month, PTSD could be the diagnosis.

WHY DO SOME PEOPLE GET PTSD WHILE OTHERS DON'T?

Several factors determine whether a person suffers from PTSD following a traumatic experience. The following are the most important factors:

Those treated with empathy and understanding have a much better chance of complete recovery.

Nature and extent of trauma. The more horrific the experience, the greater the impact it will have on anyone who experiences it.

Coping skills. People with a better ability to cope with stress will have fewer and milder symptoms.

Previous experiences. People who have experienced multiple traumatic events in the past may be at greater risk.

Current stress level. Already experiencing a great amount of life stress is likely to

make one more vulnerable in the face of a traumatic event.

Support system. Those lacking in family and friends who will listen and offer a shoulder to lean on are likely to have a much more difficult time recovering from a traumatic experience.

Family and social environment. Victims made to feel ashamed or guilty are much more likely to experience PTSD. Those treated with empathy and understanding have a much better chance of complete recovery.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT OF PTSD?

Early treatment is best. Ideally, the victim of trauma should receive supportive treatment at the earliest possible time. Victims benefit from the support of their family members, friends, and mental health professionals. The most important element of any treatment plan is to create a sense of safety.

The entire family is affected when a person experiences trauma. A skilled family therapist can help family members provide support for the victim and deal with their own feelings.

Individual psychotherapy. A therapist who specializes in working with victims of trauma can help the patient talk about the event. The patient can also be encouraged to write about it. The therapist may use behavior modification techniques and cognitive therapy to alleviate the person's fears and worries.