

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a condition that develops after an individual experiences a traumatic event that is either shocking, scary, or dangerous. People with PTSD experience stressful or frightened emotional reactions when they are not in danger.

Signs & Symptoms

Symptoms usually begin early, within three months of the traumatic event, but they can also begin years later. Symptoms must last more than a month and be severe enough to interfere with everyday activities, relationships, and work to be diagnosed as PTSD. Someone with PTSD might experience:

- Flashbacks, intrusive or unwanted memories, and upsetting dreams or nightmares
- Avoiding thinking about the event as well as avoiding associated people, places, or activities
- Negative changes in thinking/mood- feeling detached, loss of interest in activities or negative thoughts about oneself
- Physical and emotional changes- easily frightened, trouble sleeping or concentrating, self-destructive behavior

Causes & Risk Factors

Post-traumatic stress disorder can develop when an individual goes through, sees or learns about an event involving actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violation. Other causes can be the existing mental health risks, brain chemistry and hormone regulation can also play a role. Risk factors for developing PTSD include but are not limited to:

- Careers that increase the risk for experiencing trauma (military personnel or first responder)
- Experiencing trauma earlier in life (child abuse or neglect)
- Having little or no social and emotional support after the event
- Having a history of mental health or substance abuse issues

Diagnosis & Treatment

Not everyone with PTSD has been through a dangerous event, and not every traumatized person develops chronic or acute PTSD. Diagnosis of PTSD is done by a mental health professional who performs a comprehensive physical and psychological evaluation typically using the criteria for PTSD in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), published by the American Psychiatric Association. The primary treatment is psychotherapy, but medication may also be used. The most common types of therapy used in treatment plans are cognitive therapy, exposure therapy, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR).

Sources – Mayo Clinic: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/diagnosis-treatment/drc-20355973> and National Institute of Mental Health: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>