

What is post-traumatic stress disorder?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a debilitating condition caused by a terrifying event. People with PTSD have persistent, frightening thoughts and memories of their ordeal and feel emotionally numb.

PTSD, first brought to public attention by war veterans, can result from a variety of traumatic incidents. These include kidnapping, serious accidents, natural disasters and violent attacks such as a mugging, rape or torture. The triggering event may be something actually experienced by the patient or merely witnessed. PTSD can occur at any age.

The disorder can be accompanied by depression, substance abuse or anxiety. Individuals suffering from PTSD may become easily irritated or have violent outbursts. In severe cases, individuals may have trouble working or socializing. They may also have sleep problems, depression, feel detached or numb and may be easily startled. Sufferers may lose interest in things they used to enjoy and may have trouble feeling affectionate. Other symptoms can include irritability and uncharacteristic aggressiveness.

For PTSD sufferers, seeing things that remind them of the incident may be very distressing, leading them to avoid certain places or situations that bring back those memories. Anniversaries of the event are often very difficult to handle. In general, the symptoms of PTSD seem to be worse if the event that triggered them was initiated by a person, such as a rape, as opposed to an event, like a flood.

Ordinary events can serve as reminders of the trauma and trigger flashbacks. A flashback may make the person lose touch with reality and re-enact the event for a period of seconds, hours or even days. A person having a flashback usually believes that the traumatic event is happening all over again.

PTSD is diagnosed only if the symptoms last for more than a month. In those who do have PTSD, symptoms usually begin within three months of the trauma. Occasionally, the illness doesn't show up until years after the traumatic event. While some people recover within six months, others have symptoms that last much longer. In some cases, the condition may be chronic.

Treatment should be sought if you or someone you know has symptoms of post-traumatic stress syndrome. A visit to the family physician is usually the best place to start for help. A physician can determine if the symptoms are due to an anxiety disorder, some other medical condition or a combination of factors. Usually, a physician will then refer the patient to a counselor, therapist or a mental health professional.

Psychotherapy, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, is an integral part of treatment. Being exposed to a reminder of the trauma as part of therapy, such as returning to the scene of a rape, sometimes helps as well. Support from family and friends can help speed recovery while antidepressants and anxiety-reducing medications can ease the symptoms of depression and sleep problems.