

# Mental Health Matters

## Plain Talk about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder



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If you or someone you care about has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), you may feel that your problem is rare and that you have to face it alone. This is not the case. There are many people in a similar situation, and lots of help is

available. As many as 70% of adults in the United States have experienced at least one major trauma in their lives, and many of them have suffered from the emotional reactions that are called PTSD. It is estimated that 5% of the population currently have PTSD, and that 8% have had PTSD at some point in their lives. Women are twice as likely to have PTSD as men. Fortunately, very effective treatments for PTSD are now available to help you or your loved one overcome this problem and get back to a normal life.

### **What is PTSD?**

The diagnosis of PTSD requires exposure to an extreme stressor and a characteristic set of symptoms that have lasted for at least one month. Extreme stressors include: serious accident or natural disaster, rape or criminal assault, combat exposure, child sexual or physical abuse, witnessing a traumatic event, and sudden unexpected death of a loved one. Other kinds of severe, but not extreme, stress can be very upsetting but generally do not cause PTSD (such as losing a job, divorce, failing in school, the expected death of an elderly parent.)

A person with PTSD has three main types of symptoms:

1. Re-experiencing of the traumatic event as indicated by flashbacks and nightmares.
2. Avoidance and emotional numbing as indicated by feeling detached from others, avoidance of activities related to the trauma.
3. Increased arousal as indicated by difficulty sleeping, irritability or outbursts of anger, and an exaggerated startle response.

### **What other problems are associated with PTSD?**

The three types of symptoms of PTSD described above

are the most typical reactions to traumas. However, there are other problems that are also common. Many of these will improve when the PTSD symptoms are successfully treated, but some may require additional treatment on their own. Problems often associated with PTSD include:

- Panic attacks
- Severe avoidant behavior
- Depression
- Suicidal thoughts and feelings
- Substance abuse
- Feelings of alienation and isolation
- Feelings of mistrust and betrayal
- Anger and irritability
- Severe impairment in daily functioning
- Strange beliefs and perceptions

How long psychological disturbances last after a trauma can vary greatly. Some people have few or no long-lasting effects, whereas others may continue to have problems for months or even years after the trauma and will not get better unless treated by a professional.

There are three types of psychotherapy that are especially effective in treating PTSD – anxiety management, cognitive therapy, and exposure therapy. (Play therapy may be useful in the treatment of children with PTSD.) In addition, the use of certain types of medications are often beneficial. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) antidepressant medications are the best first choice for treating the symptoms of PTSD. Of course, the most important step to take in treating PTSD is to obtain a comprehensive assessment from a qualified professional.

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