

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that occurs when a person sees or experiences a traumatic event and has trouble recovering from it. PTSD is a common disorder that affects more than 3 million people in the U.S. each year.

What causes PTSD?

PTSD can occur when a person sees or experiences trauma like war, rape, abuse, violent crime, serious accidents, natural disasters, or the sudden death of a loved one. Doctors aren't sure why some people get PTSD, but you may have a higher risk if you:

- Were abused as a child
- Have a family history of other mental health problems, like depression or anxiety, or struggle with these yourself
- Have a job with an increased risk of traumatic events (like military or emergency response)
- Misuse substances, including alcohol and drugs
- Experienced intense or long-lasting trauma
- Do not have close friends or family to help

What are the signs of PTSD?

There are four types of signs that may indicate PTSD:

- **Re-experiencing signs**
 - Having flashbacks (reliving the trauma again)
 - Having frightening thoughts or nightmares
 - Repeated memories of the trauma
 - Becoming physically or emotionally distressed when reminded of the event (having panic attacks)
- **Avoidance signs**
 - Staying away from places or things that remind you of the traumatic event
 - Trying not to talk or think about the event



- **Reactivity signs**
 - Trouble sleeping and concentrating
 - Looking out for danger
 - Being easily frightened or startled
 - Having angry outbursts or increased aggression
 - Thrill-seeking and reckless behavior (driving too fast or drinking too much)
- **Mood and thought signs**
 - Emotional numbness, especially toward people you were once close to
 - Overwhelming shame or guilt
 - Negative thoughts about yourself, the world, or others
 - Forgetting important parts of the traumatic event
 - Feelings of hopelessness
 - No interest in activities you once enjoyed
 - Suicidal thoughts (in some people with PTSD)

If you've been through a serious traumatic event and are experiencing these symptoms, talk to your healthcare provider immediately.

How is PTSD diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and the traumatic event that may have caused them. They may also perform a physical exam to see if other medical problems are causing PTSD symptoms.

How is PTSD treated?

PTSD is most often treated with psychotherapy [sy-coh-THER-ruh-pee], which is counseling with a mental health provider, medicine, or both.

Psychotherapy

Research has shown that certain types of therapies effectively treat PTSD symptoms. Common trauma therapies include:

- **Trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy (TF-CBT):** Helping children and adolescents understand and think differently about trauma.
- **Eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR):** Asking you to think about distressing images while moving your eyes from side to side or tapping your hands.
- **Cognitive processing therapy (CPT):** Helping you understand the traumatic event in a new way.
- **Prolonged exposure (PE):** Re-experiencing the traumatic event by remembering aspects of it instead of avoiding it.

Meeting with a mental health professional one-on-one or in a group can help you:

- Deal with shame, guilt, and other feelings you have because of the traumatic event
- Learn to relax and control anger
- Make sense of bad memories
- Face your fears and think about the traumatic event in a safe way
- Sleep, exercise, and eat better

If you have SelectHealth insurance, contact Care Management at 800.442.5305 to find therapists who provide these specialized treatments. If you don't have SelectHealth, ask about the specific therapies when looking for a therapist.

Medicine

Antidepressants can help control PTSD symptoms, including anger, sadness, emotional numbness, and worry. Other medicines can help treat nightmares and sleep problems. However, no medicines have been proven effective for PTSD in children. Your healthcare provider will talk to you about whether you need medicine and figure out the right dose.

How else can I cope with PTSD?

If you are diagnosed with PTSD:

- Spend time with supportive friends and family who will listen if you want to talk.
- Follow your treatment plan and take all medicine if your doctor has prescribed it.
- Be patient with yourself and set realistic goals for your recovery.
- Avoid drugs and alcohol, which can cause more problems and prevent healing.
- Eat a healthy diet, get enough rest, make time to exercise, and find ways to relax.
- Figure out ways to cope with anger and anxiety, like going for a walk or trying a new hobby.
- Consider joining a support group. Email the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) at info@nami.org to find a local group.

If you or a loved one are having suicidal thoughts, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1.800.273.8255. Talk to your doctor or mental health professional, and find a close friend or family member who can help.

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