

## What Is PTSD?

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the development of symptoms following exposure to a traumatic event. Any kind of extreme stress can lead to development of PTSD. Typically, it involves direct personal experience that involves threatened or actual death or serious injury, witnessing a stressful event, or learning about an unexpected or violent death or injury to a family member or close friend.

Traumatic events that can be experienced directly include assaults, serious car accident, a natural disaster like an earthquake, personal assaults and abuse, terrorist attacks, and military combat.

You don't have to be hurt to experience PTSD. Witnessing any type of personal or environmental disaster, being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, or being threatened violence or being hurt can lead to PTSD.

Most people feel super-stressed after going through something traumatic. Strong emotions; feeling easily irritated; jitters; and trouble sleeping, eating, or concentrating all can be part of a typical and temporary reaction to an overwhelming event. Also, frequent thoughts and images of what happened, nightmares, or fears can be a part of recovering from stress.

Taking good care of yourself and getting support and help from others after after going through something like this can help these symptoms run their course and go away within a few days or weeks and allow one to feel better and move on.

But PTSD is different. When someone has PTSD, the symptoms of stress are intense and last for longer than a month. For some people, the symptoms of PTSD begin soon after the trauma, but others have a delayed response.

## Symptoms of PTSD

Whether it occurs right after the trauma or later on, PTSD has certain characteristic symptoms that usually develop within 3 months of the traumatic event.

People with PTSD generally experience some or all of these symptoms:

- Reliving the traumatic event. People with PTSD might have nightmares, flashbacks, or disturbing mental images about the trauma.
- Avoiding reminders of the trauma. People with PTSD may avoid people, places, or activities that remind them of the stressful event. They may also avoid talking about what happened.
- Emotional numbness. Many people with PTSD feel numb or detached; they may not feel the same way about other people or the world. This could be caused by the overproduction of certain chemicals that block sensation during extreme stress.
- Hypervigilance. People with PTSD may be easily startled, on edge, jumpy, irritable, or tense. This may be due to high levels of stress hormones in the body. Difficulty concentrating and trouble sleeping may also be part of this hyper-alert state.

## How do I know if my child has PTSD?

### Signs and Symptoms

If the symptoms started after the child or youth experienced or witnessed a traumatic event, and if the symptoms don't go away, they might have PTSD. The symptoms can start right after the trauma or months or even years after.

There are four different types of post-traumatic stress reactions. To be diagnosed with PTSD, the child or youth should have at least one symptom from each of these three types.

1. The child or youth may re-live the trauma in their minds. They may:

- have upsetting and disturbing memories, 'pictures', and thoughts stuck in their minds about what happened
- act out parts of the event during play
- have frightening dreams
- act out the traumatic event or feel like it's happening right now
- be very upset or have physical reactions when seeing or hearing reminders of the trauma (a siren, photo of a family member, door slamming, bedroom)

2. The child or youth may avoid things that remind them of the trauma. They may:

- stay away from things associated with the trauma (clothing, dogs, if trauma was a dog attack)
- avoid thoughts, feelings or conversation associated with the trauma

3. The child or youth may experience changes in thoughts and feelings as a result of the trauma. They may:

- forget parts of the trauma or be confused about when things happened
- think more negatively about themselves, others, and the world
- blame themselves or others for the event
- feel negative emotions (anger, fear, horror etc.) that won't go away
- lose interest in things they used to enjoy (quit sports team or dance class, no longer want to swim or play with friends)
- show little emotion after a trauma or not want to be around people
- not be able to feel positive emotions (pleasure, satisfaction etc.)

4. The child or youth may seem extremely alert and "on guard". They may:

- have difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- have a hard time concentrating or completing tasks
- often be on "guard" or look for signs of danger
- feel jittery or nervous, or easily startled; jump at sounds or possible threats (telephone ringing, a dog barking)

- do things that are reckless and dangerous
- become angry easily

## PTSD in different age groups

The following chart lists symptoms that can be seen in children suffering from PTSD at different ages. It's important to remember that some of these symptoms may occur during stressful times and not just with PTSD. But if a child or youth has symptoms in reaction to a frightening event that remain for a long time, they may be suffering from PTSD.

Stage	Symptoms
Early childhood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> fear of strangers, family, or situations (clingy, avoiding, crying)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> replays trauma through play or artwork</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> more alert (easily startled, very aware of danger)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> act younger or no longer use already learned skills (stop using the potty, start sucking thumb)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> body complaints (stomach aches, headaches, aches and pains)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> frightening dreams unrelated to the traumatic event</li> </ul>
School-aged children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> afraid of being separated from caregivers (doesn't want to be apart, trouble sleeping alone)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> loss of trust (doesn't trust caregiver to keep them safe)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> negative view of the world (thinks world is dangerous)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> replays trauma through play or artwork</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> difficulty concentrating</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> loss of appetite</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> does more things without thinking first (impulsive, fights without considering the consequences)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> defiant, or has intense anger outbursts or aggression</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> mood changes, be unhappy or depressed</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> body complaints (stomach aches, headaches, aches and pains)</li> </ul>
Teenagers young adults	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> afraid to be separated from caregivers (clingy, resists being alone, tries to be near)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> loss of trust (mistrusts caregiver)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> negative view of the world (thinks world is dangerous)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> very irritable, angry outbursts</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> impulsive behaviour (substance use, self-harm)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> defiant, aggressive</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> repeated thoughts of death, dying, killing themselves</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> risky behaviour, self-injury (cutting themselves, alcohol and drug use, unprotected sexual behaviour)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> mood changes, seem unhappy or depressed</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> loss of appetite</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> loss of interest in activities they used to enjoy</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> body complaints (stomach aches, headaches, aches and pains)</li> </ul>

## Who Develops PTSD?

People of any age — kids, teens, and adults — can develop PTSD. But not everyone who experiences a serious trauma develops it. In fact, most people do not. Many recover from life-threatening traumas without developing PTSD. This ability to cope and bounce back is called resilience.

What makes some people more resilient to extremely stressful events when others have trouble coping? Researchers have found that certain things can us recover faster from trauma. Everything from someone's belief in his or her ability to overcome problems to the types of hormones a person's body produces may play a role in how we cope with extreme stress.

What we do know is how important it is to have people to talk to when you go through something like this — friends, family, or a counselor to talk to. Support groups also are good places to vent about thoughts and feelings.

The intensity or circumstances of a trauma can also affect how we react to it. National disasters like the terrorist attacks of 9/11 can cause widespread anxiety, regardless of whether someone was there or not. In some cases, seeing these events and the traumatic images portrayed on TV and the Internet can lead to symptoms of PTSD.

## How Is PTSD Treated?

PTSD usually doesn't just go away on its own. Without treatment, symptoms can last for months or years, or they may come and go in waves. Getting treatment and support can make all the difference.

Mental health professionals (such as psychologists, psychiatrists, and counselors) who specialize in treating anxiety problems are usually experienced in working with people who have PTSD.

Therapy for PTSD may involve gradually talking it through in a safe environment and learning coping skills that help with anxiety, fear, or panic. This can include relaxation techniques that help people with PTSD reset their stress response and techniques to resolve other problems, such as sleeping difficulties. Sometimes medications can help reduce symptoms of anxiety, panic, or depression.

## Healing From Trauma

Sometimes people avoid seeking professional help because they're afraid that talking about an incident will bring back memories or feelings that are too painful.

It can be difficult to talk about a traumatic event at first, but doing so in a safe environment with the help and support of a trained professional can often lead to long-term healing. Working through the memories and worries can help reduce symptoms like nightmares and flashbacks. It can also help people avoid potentially harmful behaviors and emotions, like extreme anger or drug use.

So how do you find the right therapist or counselor for you? The best way is to ask a parent, doctor, or adult you trust for help. People who are close to you know you well and understand your needs. (Having

a support system of family and friends can really help in recovering from PTSD.) A doctor or school counselor may also be able to help you find a mental health professional who specializes in anxiety problems. And there are lots of resources available to help locate therapists in your area.

Seeking help from a professional for overcoming PTSD is a step that makes some people worry that it means they're "crazy." But often it's the best thing you can do to manage your stress. PTSD is like many other issues: you are under stress, and stress management can help you reduce unwanted worries and difficulties.

In the case of PTSD, the stress response system isn't switching off as it should. A stress system that is faulty or over-vigilant is like a motor running for too long and can lead to burnout (such as the inability to study or enjoy activities). A therapist can help someone deal with the feelings of guilt, shame, or anger that may accompany PTSD — and discover inner strengths that can make them feel better.

PTSD is treatable. Some people learn that in the process of healing from trauma they discover strengths they didn't know they had, or a support network that they didn't know was there. Others find that treatment helps them develop new insights into life and how to cope with other problems.