

What is PTSD?

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may develop after an individual has been through a disastrous or harrowing event. The traumatic event may be life threatening, extremely frightening, or emotionally intense. Symptoms of PTSD can materialize after any stressful event, from financial distress and divorce to combat exposure and natural disasters.

Most individuals display stress-related reactions for some time after experiencing traumatic events. As time passes, these reactions usually diminish. It's when these reactions don't decrease with time that an individual may be diagnosed with PTSD.

It's important to remember that not everyone will develop PTSD after going through a traumatic event. What might be distressing for one person might not be for another. Regardless of the circumstances under which PTSD develops, it is a real, pervasive, and treatable disorder.

Military Connection

Combat service is notorious for creating PTSD. Throughout U.S. history there have been a variety of names given to the group of symptoms we now know as PTSD. In the Civil War, it was called Soldier's Heart. In World War I, it was known as Combat Fatigue. And in World War II, it was called Gross Stress Reactions. Then came Post-Vietnam Syndrome, Battle Fatigue, and Shell Shock.

Combat is inherently stressful and can be very gruesome. The risk of developing PTSD increases based on the number, duration, and severity of the traumas a person experiences. It's easy to see that combat zones lend themselves to these criteria.

The Numbers Behind PTSD

- Over 7 million adults in the U.S. have PTSD in a given year.
- Women are more likely to develop PTSD than men.
- 50% of abused children develop PTSD.
- 45% of battered women develop PTSD.
- 14% of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have PTSD.
- About 30% of Vietnam veterans have PTSD.
- 50% of veterans with PTSD do not seek treatment.



RESOURCES

National Center for PTSD:

www.ptsd.va.gov

National Alliance on Mental Illness:

www.nami.org/template.cfm?section=PTSD

National Institute of Mental Health:

www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/Post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd

Make the Connection:

www.maketheconnection.net/conditions/ptsd

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Symptoms & Effects

The symptoms of PTSD usually manifest within three months of the trauma. Symptoms of PTSD fall into three categories:

Hyperarousal – The feeling that the trauma is constantly in danger of reoccurring. The sufferer will be easily startled or agitated, constantly feel in danger, have difficulty sleeping, and be unable to concentrate on anything other than the perceived threat. Individuals who experience hyperarousal are more likely to self-medicate with drugs or alcohol.

Intrusion – The trauma seems to reoccur to the sufferer. This happens in the form of sudden, vivid memories commonly called flashbacks. Flashbacks can seem so real that the sufferer actually experiences the trauma again, including feeling the physical aftermath of the event, like being injured. Realistic nightmares of the event may also occur, affecting the individual's ability to sleep.

Avoidance or Numbing – The feeling of being disconnected from emotions and reality. This, in turn, may lead to a lack of emotional control. The sufferer may lose interest in life and other people and become hopeless and withdrawn. Individuals will avoid activities and places that remind them of the trauma.

When these symptoms persist for more than a month and cause functional disability, a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder may be made.

Risk Factors

PTSD can occur in people of all ages. But just like with other disorders, there are factors that may make certain individuals more likely to develop PTSD. Factors that contribute to developing PTSD include:

- Having experienced trauma early in life.
- Being exposed to long-lasting or intense trauma.
- Having other mental health problems.
- Having relatives with mental health problems.
- Lacking social support after the trauma.

Resilience Factors

There are steps that individuals can take to reduce their risk of developing PTSD, both before and after the trauma occurs.

Those in the military understand that they may be exposed to traumatic events. Resilience and stress control training prior to deployment can enable individuals to handle trauma more effectively.



After the trauma, factors that may reduce the risk of PTSD include:

- Seeking out support from other people, including family, friends, therapists, or support groups.
- Maintaining an optimistic outlook and feeling good about one's actions in the face of danger.
- Developing a coping strategy.
- Exercising.
- Engaging in altruistic activities.
- Avoiding drugs and alcohol.
- Spending time outdoors.

Treatment

PTSD can impact family life and physical health, making early treatment a critical element in preventing these problems from occurring.

Treatment for PTSD involves helping individuals deal with the trauma they've experienced by working through their feelings about the trauma, handling intrusive memories, and addressing the problems PTSD has caused in their lives.

Types of therapy include:

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) – Also known as talk therapy, this treatment helps individuals gradually expose themselves to feelings and situations that evoke memories of the trauma. Individuals also work to identify negative and irrational cognitive patterns and replace them with more balanced patterns.

Exposure Therapy – This treatment provides a safe environment where individuals will be exposed to the trauma they experienced. Writing exercises, mental imagery, and virtual reality programs are used to enable individuals to face and control their fear.



Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EDMR) – This therapy combines exposure therapy with guided eye movements. This therapy helps to reduce the anxiety that arises when thinking about traumatic events.

Family Therapy – As PTSD can affect your family as well, family therapy helps to improve communication and address any relationship problems that have developed. This therapy also provides loved ones with a better understanding of what the PTSD sufferer is experiencing.

Antidepressant medications might also be used in conjunction with therapy. In many cases, antidepressants help to control feelings of sadness or anxiety and ease the process of psychotherapy.

Recovery

Recovering from PTSD is a gradual process. Sometimes, the symptoms of PTSD may not completely disappear with time. But therapy can provide the coping skills necessary to handle these symptoms.

While there is some stigma associated with seeking out mental health care, it's important to realize that PTSD is not a sign of weakness but a challenge that can be overcome. With time and determination, those suffering from PTSD can continue living happy and healthy lives.

Getting Help

If you believe that you or a loved one has PTSD, it's essential to get help right away. Soldiers can contact their base mental health professional and veterans have access to resources through the Department of Veterans Affairs.