

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

After people experience a very stressful event, they may feel that they should be able to move on and “just handle it” or “get over it.” Some experiences, however, are so traumatic that some individuals have serious problems coping and functioning in their daily lives afterward. They may have **posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**. The August 1, 2007, issue of *JAMA* is a theme issue on violence and human rights. This Patient Page is based on one previously published in the August 2, 2006, issue of *JAMA*.

WHAT IS POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)?

Posttraumatic stress disorder is the development of characteristic symptoms that last for more than 1 month, along with difficulty functioning after exposure to a life-threatening experience.

SYMPTOMS

- **Intrusion**—memories of the trauma or “flashbacks” that occur unexpectedly; these may include nightmares or physical reactions such as a racing heart
- **Avoidance**—avoiding people, places, thoughts, or activities that bring back memories of the trauma; this may involve feeling numb or emotionless, withdrawing from family and friends, or “self-medicating” by abusing alcohol or other drugs
- **Hyperarousal**—feeling “on guard” or irritable, having sleep problems, having difficulty concentrating, feeling overly alert and being easily startled, having sudden outbursts of anger

WHO IS AT RISK FOR PTSD?

- People with military combat experience or civilians who have been harmed by war
- People who have been raped, sexually abused, or physically abused
- People who have been involved in or who have witnessed a life-threatening event
- People who have been involved in a natural disaster, such as a tornado or an earthquake

TREATING PTSD

- Cognitive behavioral therapy with a trained psychiatrist, psychologist, or other professional can help change emotions, thoughts, and behaviors associated with PTSD and can facilitate managing panic, anger, and anxiety.
- Certain medications can reduce symptoms such as anxiety, impulsivity, depression, and insomnia and decrease urges to use alcohol and other drugs.
- Group therapy can help patients learn to communicate their feelings about the trauma and create a support network.
- Becoming informed about PTSD and sharing information with family and friends can create understanding and support during recovery.

Sources: American Psychiatric Association, Anxiety Disorders Association of America, National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, National Institute of Mental Health, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Alliance

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Psychiatric Association
www.psych.org/public_info
- Anxiety Disorders Association of America
www.adaa.org
- National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder
www.ncptsd.org
- National Institute of Mental Health/Anxiety Disorders Education Program
www.nimh.nih.gov
- Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Alliance
www.ptsdalliance.org

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