



Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Frightening situations happen to everyone at some point. People can react in many different ways: they might feel nervous, have a hard time sleeping well, or go over the details of the situation in their mind. These thoughts or experiences are a normal reaction. They usually decrease over time and the people involved can go back to their daily lives. Post-traumatic stress disorder, on the other hand, lasts much longer and can seriously disrupt a person's life.

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What is post-traumatic stress disorder?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental illness. It often involves exposure to trauma from single events that involve death or the threat of death or serious injury. PTSD may also be linked to ongoing emotional trauma, such as abuse in a relationship.

Something is traumatic when it is very frightening, overwhelming and causes a lot of distress. Trauma is often unexpected, and many people say that they felt powerless to stop or change the event. Traumatic events may include crimes, natural disasters, accidents, war or conflict, sexual violence or other threats to life or safety. It could be an event or situation that you experience yourself or something that happens to others, including loved ones.

PTSD causes intrusive symptoms such as re-experiencing the traumatic event. Many people have vivid nightmares, flashbacks, or thoughts of the event that seem to come from nowhere. They often avoid things that remind them of the event—for example, someone who was hurt in a car crash might avoid driving.

PTSD can make people feel very nervous or 'on edge' all the time. Many feel startled very easily, have a hard time concentrating, feel irritable, or have problems sleeping well. They may often feel like something terrible is about to happen, even when they are safe. Some people feel very numb and detached. They may feel like things around them aren't real, feel disconnected from their body or thoughts, or have a hard time feeling emotions.

People also experience a change in their thoughts and mood related to the traumatic event. For some people, alcohol or other drugs can be a way to cope with PTSD.

Who does it affect?

While most people experience trauma at some point in their life, not all traumatic experiences lead to PTSD. We aren't sure why trauma causes PTSD in some people but not others, but it's likely linked to many different factors. This includes the length of time the trauma lasted, the number of other traumatic experiences in a person's life, their reaction to the event, and the kind of support they received after the event.

Some jobs or occupations put people in dangerous situations. Military personnel, first responders (police, firefighters, and paramedics), doctors, and nurses experience higher rates of PTSD than other professions.

Trauma is not always a single event in the past. Some trauma, particularly repeated acts like abuse or trauma during wartime, can impact a person's life far beyond the symptoms of PTSD. Some use other terms like 'complex PTSD' to describe these experiences.

What can I do about it?

Many people feel a lot of guilt or shame around PTSD because we're often told that we should just get over difficult experiences. Others may feel embarrassed talking with others. Some people even feel like it's somehow their own fault. Trauma is hurtful. If you experience problems in your life related to trauma, it's important to take your feelings seriously and talk to a health care professional.

Counselling

A type of counselling called cognitive-behavioural therapy (or 'CBT') has been shown to be effective for PTSD. CBT teaches you how your thoughts, feelings, and behaviours work together and how to deal with problems and stress. You can also learn skills like relaxation and techniques to bring you back to the present. You can learn and practice many skills in CBT on your own. Exposure therapy, which can help you talk about your experience and reduce avoidance, may also help. It may be included in CBT or used on its own.

Medication

Medication, such as anti-anxiety medication or antidepressant medication, may help with anxiety itself, as well as related problems like depression or sleep difficulties. Talk to your doctor if you'd like to learn more about medication options.

Support groups

Support groups can also help. They are a place to share your own experiences and learn from others, and help you connect with people who understand what you're going through. There may also be support groups for loved ones affected by PTSD.

How can I help a loved one?

When someone is diagnosed with PTSD, loved ones can also experience a lot of difficulties. You may feel guilty or angry about the trauma itself—then, on top of those feelings, experience difficulties around PTSD. You may feel like your loved one is a different person, worry that things will never be normal, or wonder what will happen in the future. Here are some tips to help you cope:

- Start by learning more about PTSD. This can give you a better idea of your loved one's experiences.
- People who experience PTSD may withdraw from family and friends. Even if your loved one doesn't want to talk, you can still remind them that you are there to listen when they're ready.
- Understand that behaviours related to PTSD—like avoiding certain situations or reacting angrily to a minor problem—are not about you. They are about the illness.

- While it's usually not a good idea to support behaviours that create problems, it's still important to support your loved one's overall movement toward wellness. This balance is not always easy, but you need to respect your own boundaries, too.
- Ask what you can do to help, but don't push unwanted advice.
- Try to put your own feelings into words and encourage your loved one to do the same. It's easier to solve problems or look at conflicts when you know what's really going on.
- Take care of your own wellness, and seek support for yourself if you experience difficulties.
- If a loved one's PTSD is affecting other family members, it may be helpful to seek family counselling.

With support, people can recover from PTSD and the effects of trauma. Recovery is good for the entire family, especially for young people who are still learning how to interact with the world. A loved one's recovery is a chance for everyone to learn the skills that support wellness.

Do you need more help?

Contact a community organization like the Canadian Mental Health Association to learn more about support and resources in your area.

Founded in 1918, The Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is a national charity that helps maintain and improve mental health for all Canadians. As the nation-wide leader and champion for mental health, CMHA helps people access the community resources they need to build resilience and support recovery from mental illness.

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