

Understanding PTSD: What It Is and How to Find Support

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Experiencing emotional distress after a life-threatening or traumatic event is common. Many people begin to feel better within a few weeks, but for some, the effects can last much longer. When people continue to experience emotional distress for an extended period of time, this may be a sign that they could be experiencing post-traumatic stress.

What is post-traumatic stress disorder?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that may develop after someone experiences or witnesses a frightening, dangerous, or deeply upsetting event. Examples of traumatic events include abuse, natural disasters, serious accidents, violence, military combat, or the sudden loss of a loved one (SAMSHA, 2023).

PTSD is not a sign of weakness. It is a medical and psychological response to trauma that can affect anyone regardless of age, gender, or background. Approximately 6.8% of adults in the United States will experience PTSD at some point in their lives (Schein et al., 2021). However, not everyone who experiences trauma develops PTSD. Risk may increase when the trauma is severe or long-lasting, involves personal injury or the loss of a loved one, or when a person has little support afterward (Jones et al., 2024). PTSD is more commonly reported among women, veterans, and emergency responders and PTSD often occurs alongside other mental health conditions, including anxiety and depression (Akbari et al., 2022; Andualetm et

al., 2024). If you or someone you know has experienced a life-threatening or traumatic event, here are some common symptoms of PTSD to watch for:

- **Reliving the traumatic event** through flashbacks, nightmares, and unwanted memories.
- **Avoiding reminders of the trauma** including people, places, and activities.
- **Feeling constantly alert**, anxious, or 'on edge'.

PTSD symptoms do not always appear immediately after a traumatic event. Some individuals may begin experiencing symptoms weeks, months, or even years later. Symptoms may also increase during periods of stress or after reminders of the trauma. It may be helpful to seek professional support if symptoms last longer than a month and begin interfering with daily life.

What can help manage PTSD symptoms?

Recovery from PTSD is possible. With appropriate treatment and support, many people experience significant improvement in their symptoms and quality of life. Treatment for

PTSD often includes therapy, medication, or a combination of both. You should talk with a medical or mental health professional for help deciding a treatment plan that works best for your individual situation. There are many types of treatment options available, however the most common types of therapy include:

- **Exposure therapy:** This approach helps individuals gradually and safely face memories, feelings, or situations connected to the trauma so they can learn healthier ways to cope.
- **Cognitive therapy:** This approach helps people identify and understand patterns in their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that may contribute to distress. (APA, 2017)

Therapeutic interventions can support the development of coping skills, stress management techniques, and healthy daily routines (Siebert et al., 2026). In addition to professional treatment, healthy routines and social support can help people manage symptoms. Regular sleep, physical activity, stress reduction techniques, and staying connected to trusted friends or family members may improve overall well-being (Liang et al., 2023; Sedoff et al., 2026).

You can also take steps to prevent PTSD from developing. Seeking professional help within hours of experiencing a traumatic event and relying on established support networks has been shown to reduce the risk of developing PTSD related symptoms (Post et al., 2017).

If you are unsure where to start, your primary care provider may be able to connect you with mental health services, local clinics, or support groups in your area. The following resources may also be helpful:

- National Suicide & Crisis Lifeline | (988) | <https://988lifeline.org/>
- SAMHSA Helpline | (1-800-662-HELP) | <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/helplines/national-helpline>
- National Center for PTSD | <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/>

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