

# Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



## Symptoms, Treatment, and Self-Help for PTSD

After a traumatic experience, it's normal to feel frightened, sad, anxious, and disconnected. But if the upset doesn't fade and you feel stuck with a constant sense of danger and painful memories, you may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It can seem like you'll never get over what happened or feel normal again. But by seeking treatment, reaching out for support, and developing new coping skills, you can overcome PTSD and move on with your life.

# What is PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can develop following any event that makes you fear for your safety. Most people associate PTSD with rape or battle-scarred soldiers—and military combat is the most common cause in men. But any event, or series of events, that overwhelms you with feelings of hopelessness and helplessness and leaves you emotionally shattered, can trigger PTSD. This may happen especially if the event feels unpredictable and uncontrollable.

PTSD can affect people who personally experience the traumatic event, those who witness the event, or those who pick up the pieces afterwards, such as emergency workers and law enforcement officers. PTSD can also result from surgery performed on children too young to fully understand what's happening to them.

## PTSD vs. a normal response to traumatic events

Following a traumatic event, almost everyone experiences at least some of the symptoms of PTSD. When your sense of safety and trust are shattered, it's normal to feel unbalanced, disconnected, or numb. It's very common to have bad dreams, feel fearful, and find it difficult to stop thinking about what happened. **These are normal reactions to abnormal events.**

For most people, however, these symptoms are short-lived. They may last for several days or even weeks, but they gradually lift. But if you have post-traumatic stress disorder, the symptoms don't decrease. You don't feel a little better each day. In fact, you may start to feel worse.

### A normal response to trauma becomes PTSD when you get stuck

After a traumatic experience, the mind and the body are in shock. But as you make sense of what happened and process your emotions, you start to come out of it. With PTSD, however, you remain in psychological shock. Your memory of what happened and your feelings about it are disconnected. In order to move on, it's important to face and feel your memories and emotions.

## Signs and symptoms of PTSD

PTSD develops differently from person to person because everyone's nervous system and tolerance for stress is a little different. While you're most likely to develop symptoms of PTSD in the hours or days following a traumatic event, it can sometimes take weeks, months, or even years before they appear. Sometimes symptoms appear seemingly out of the blue. At other times, they are triggered by something that reminds you of the original traumatic event, such as a noise, an image, certain words, or a smell.

While everyone experiences PTSD differently, there are four main types of symptoms.

1. **Re-experiencing the traumatic event** through intrusive memories, flashbacks, nightmares, or intense mental or physical reactions when reminded of the trauma.
2. **Avoidance and numbing**, such as avoiding anything that reminds you of the trauma, being unable to remember aspects of the ordeal, a loss of interest in activities and life in general, feeling emotionally numb and detached from others and a sense of a limited future.
3. **Hyperarousal**, including sleep problems, irritability, hypervigilance (on constant "red alert"), feeling jumpy or easily startled, angry outbursts, and aggressive, self-destructive, or reckless behavior.

4. **Negative thought and mood changes** like feeling alienated and alone, difficulty concentrating or remembering, depression and hopelessness, feeling mistrust and betrayal, and feeling guilt, shame, or self-blame.

## PTSD symptoms in children

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In children – especially very young children – the symptoms of PTSD can differ from those of adults and may include:

- Fear of being separated from their parent
- Losing previously-acquired skills (such as toilet training)
- Sleep problems and nightmares
- Somber, compulsive play in which themes or aspects of the trauma are repeated
- New phobias and anxieties that seem unrelated to the trauma (such as fear of monsters)
- Acting out the trauma through play, stories, or drawings
- Aches and pains with no apparent cause
- Irritability and aggression

### Do you have PTSD?

If you answer yes to three or more of the questions below, you may have PTSD and it's worthwhile to visit a qualified mental health professional.

- Have you witnessed or experienced a traumatic, life-threatening event?
- Did this experience make you feel intensely afraid, horrified, or helpless?
- Do you have trouble getting the event out of your mind?
- Do you startle more easily and feel more irritable or angry than you did before the event?
- Do you go out of your way to avoid activities, people, or thoughts that remind you of the event?
- Do you have more trouble falling asleep or concentrating than you did before the event?
- Have your symptoms lasted for more than a month?
- Is your distress making it hard for you to work or function normally?

## PTSD risk factors

While it's impossible to predict who will develop PTSD in response to trauma, there are certain risk factors that increase your vulnerability. Many risk factors revolve around the nature of the traumatic event itself. Traumatic events are more likely to cause PTSD when they involve a severe threat to your life or personal safety: the more extreme and prolonged the threat, the greater the risk of developing PTSD in response. Intentional, human-inflicted harm—such as rape, assault, and torture—also tends to be more traumatic than “acts of God,” or more impersonal accidents and disasters. The extent to which the traumatic event was unexpected, uncontrollable, and inescapable also plays a role.

Other risk factors for PTSD include:

- Previous traumatic experiences, especially in early life
- Family history of PTSD or depression
- History of physical or sexual abuse
- History of substance abuse
- History of depression, anxiety, or another mental illness

# PTSD causes and types of trauma

Trauma or PTSD symptoms can result from many different types of distressing experiences, including military combat, childhood neglect or abuse, an accident, natural disaster, personal tragedy, or violence. But whatever your personal experiences or symptoms, the following can offer strategies to help you heal and move on:

## PTSD in military veterans

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For all too many veterans, returning from military service means coping with symptoms of PTSD. You may have a hard time readjusting to life out of the military. Or you may constantly feel on edge, emotionally numb and disconnected, or close to panicking or exploding. But it's important to know that you're not alone and there are plenty of ways you can deal with nightmares and flashbacks, cope with feelings of depression, anxiety or guilt, and regain your sense of control.

## Emotional and psychological trauma

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If you've experienced an extremely stressful event—or series of events—that's left you feeling helpless and emotionally out of control, you may have been traumatized. Psychological trauma often has its roots in childhood, but any event that shatters your sense of safety can leave you feeling traumatized, whether it's an accident, injury, the sudden death of a loved one, bullying, domestic abuse, or a deeply humiliating experience. Whether the trauma happened years ago or yesterday, you can get over the pain, feel safe again, and move on with your life.

## Rape or sexual trauma

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The trauma of being raped or sexually assaulted can be shattering, leaving you feeling scared, ashamed, and alone, or plagued by nightmares, flashbacks, and other unpleasant memories. But no matter how bad you feel right now, it's important to remember that you weren't to blame for what happened, and you can regain your sense of safety, trust, and self-worth.

## PTSD self-help tip 1: Challenge your sense of helplessness

Recovery from PTSD is a gradual, ongoing process. Healing doesn't happen overnight, nor do the memories of the trauma ever disappear completely. This can make life seem difficult at times. But there are many steps you can take to cope with the residual symptoms and reduce your anxiety and fear.

Overcoming your sense of helplessness is key to overcoming PTSD. Trauma leaves you feeling powerless and vulnerable. It's important to remind yourself that you have strengths and coping skills that can get you through tough times.

One of the best ways to reclaim your sense of power is by helping others: volunteer your time, give blood, reach out to a friend in need, or donate to your favorite charity. Taking positive action directly challenges the sense of helplessness that is a common symptom of PTSD.

## Positive ways of coping with PTSD:

- Learn about trauma and PTSD
- Join a PTSD support group
- Practice relaxation techniques
- Pursue outdoor activities
- Confide in a person you trust
- Spend time with positive people
- Avoid alcohol and drugs
- Enjoy the peace of nature

## Tip 2: Get moving

When you're suffering from PTSD, exercise can do more than release endorphins and improve your mood and outlook. By really focusing on your body and how it feels as you move, exercise can actually help your nervous system become "unstuck" and begin to move out of the immobilization stress response. Try:

**Rhythmic exercise that engages both your arms and legs**, such as walking, running, swimming, or dancing. Instead of focusing on your thoughts, focus on how your body feels. Notice the sensation of your feet hitting the ground, for example, or the rhythm of your breathing, or the feeling of the wind on your skin.

**Rock climbing, boxing, weight training, or martial arts.** These activities can make it easier to focus on your body movements—after all, if you don't, you could get hurt.

**Spending time in nature.** Pursuing outdoor activities like hiking, camping, mountain biking, rock climbing, whitewater rafting, and skiing helps veterans cope with PTSD symptoms and transition back into civilian life. Anyone with PTSD can benefit from the relaxation, seclusion, and peace that come with being out in nature. Seek out local organizations that offer outdoor recreation or teambuilding opportunities.

## Tip 3: Reach out to others for support

PTSD can make you feel disconnected from others. You may be tempted to withdraw from social activities and your loved ones. But it's important to stay connected to life and the people who care about you. You don't have to talk about the trauma if you don't want to, but the caring support and companionship of others is vital to your recovery. Reach out to someone you can connect with for an uninterrupted period of time, someone who will listen when you want to talk without judging, criticizing, or continually getting distracted. That person may be your significant other, a family member, a friend, or a professional therapist. Or you could try:

**Volunteering** your time or reaching out to a friend in need. This is not only a great way to connect to others, but can also help you reclaim your sense of control.

**Joining a PTSD support group.** This can help you feel less isolated and alone and also provide invaluable information on how to cope with symptoms and work towards recovery.

## If connecting with others is difficult

No matter how close you are to someone, or how helpful they try to be, the symptoms of PTSD that leave your nervous system feeling “stuck” can also make it difficult to connect to others. If you still don’t feel any better after talking to others, there are ways to help the process along.

**Exercise or move.** Before meeting with a friend, either exercise or move around. Jump up and down, swing your arms and legs, or just flail around. Your head will feel clearer and you’ll find it easier to connect.

**Vocal toning.** As strange as it sounds, vocal toning is also a great way to open up your nervous system to social engagement—as well as lower stress hormones. Try sneaking off to a quiet place before chatting with friends. Sit up straight and with your lips together and teeth slightly apart, simply make “mmmm” sounds. Change the pitch and volume until you experience a pleasant vibration in your face. Practice for a few minutes and notice if the vibration spreads to your heart and stomach.

## Tip 4: Support PTSD treatment with a healthy lifestyle

The symptoms of PTSD can be hard on your body so it’s important to take care of yourself and develop some healthy lifestyle habits.

**Take time to relax.** Relaxation techniques such as meditation, deep breathing, massage, or yoga can activate the body’s relaxation response and ease symptoms of PTSD.

**Avoid alcohol and drugs.** When you’re struggling with difficult emotions and traumatic memories, you may be tempted to self-medicate with alcohol or drugs. But substance use worsens many symptoms of PTSD, interferes with treatment, and can add to problems in your relationships.

**Eat a healthy diet.** Start your day right with breakfast, and keep your energy up and your mind clear with balanced, nutritious meals throughout the day. Omega-3s play a vital role in emotional health so incorporate foods such as fatty fish, flaxseed, and walnuts into your diet. Limit processed food, fried food, refined starches, and sugars, which can exacerbate mood swings and cause fluctuations in your energy.

**Get enough sleep.** Sleep deprivation can trigger anger, irritability, and moodiness. Aim for somewhere between 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Develop a relaxing bedtime ritual (listen to calming music, watch a funny show, or read something light) and make your bedroom as quiet, dark, and soothing as possible.

## Getting professional help for PTSD

If you suspect that you or a loved one has post-traumatic stress disorder, it’s important to seek help right away. The sooner PTSD is treated, the easier it is to overcome. If you’re reluctant to seek help, keep in mind that PTSD is not a sign of weakness, and the only way to overcome it is to confront what happened to you and learn to accept it as a part of your past. This process is much easier with the guidance and support of an experienced therapist or doctor.

It’s only natural to want to avoid painful memories and feelings. But if you try to numb yourself and push your memories away, PTSD will only get worse. You can’t escape your emotions completely—they emerge under stress or whenever you let down your guard—and trying to do so is exhausting.

The avoidance will ultimately harm your relationships, your ability to function, and the quality of your life.

## Why you should seek help for PTSD

**Early treatment is better.** Symptoms of PTSD may get worse. Dealing with them now might help stop them from getting worse in the future. Finding out more about what treatments work, where to look for help, and what kind of questions to ask can make it easier to get help and lead to better outcomes.

**PTSD symptoms can change family life.** PTSD symptoms can get in the way of your family life. You may find that you pull away from loved ones, are not able to get along with people, or that you are angry or even violent. Getting help for your PTSD can help improve your family life.

**PTSD can be related to other health problems.** PTSD symptoms can make physical health problems worse. For example, studies have shown a relationship between PTSD and heart trouble. Getting help for your PTSD could also improve your physical health.

Source: *National Center for PTSD*

## PTSD treatment and therapy

Treatment for PTSD can relieve symptoms by helping you deal with the trauma you've experienced. A doctor or therapist will encourage you to recall and process the emotions you felt during the original event in order to reduce the powerful hold the memory has on your life.

During treatment you'll also explore your thoughts and feelings about the trauma, work through feelings of guilt and mistrust, learn how to cope with intrusive memories, and address the problems PTSD has caused in your life and relationships.

The types of treatment available for PTSD include:

**Trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral therapy** involves gradually "exposing" yourself to feelings and situations that remind you of the trauma, and replacing distorted and irrational thoughts about the experience with a more balanced picture.

**Family therapy** can help your loved ones understand what you're going through and help you work through relationship problems together as a family.

**Medication** is sometimes prescribed to people with PTSD to relieve secondary symptoms of depression or anxiety, although they do not treat the causes of PTSD.

**EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing)** incorporates elements of cognitive-behavioral therapy with eye movements or other forms of rhythmic, left-right stimulation, such as hand taps or sounds. These techniques work by "unfreezing" the brain's information processing system, which is interrupted in times of extreme stress.

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## Finding a therapist for PTSD

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When looking for a therapist, seek out mental health professionals who specialize in the treatment of trauma and PTSD. You can ask your doctor or other trauma survivors for a referral, call a local mental health clinic, psychiatric hospital, or counseling center.

Beyond credentials and experience, it's important to find a PTSD therapist who makes you feel comfortable and safe. Trust your gut; if a therapist doesn't feel right, look for someone else. For therapy to work, you need to feel comfortable and understood.