

Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress

What is trauma?

Trauma is an event or series of events that involve fear or threat. Traumas include: child abuse, sexual or physical assault, witnessing violence, disasters, serious accidents, violent crime, and the sudden or violent death of a loved one.

What is Posttraumatic Stress (PTS)?

PTS is reactions to trauma. It is when remembering or being reminded of the trauma is connected to intense negative feelings. PTS also involves changes in mood and ways of thinking.

Symptoms of PTS

Intrusion

- Intrusive, unwanted, upsetting memories
- Flashbacks; feeling like the trauma is happening right now
- Nightmares about the trauma

Avoidance

- Pushing memories or thoughts about the trauma out of mind
- Avoiding reminders of the trauma

Changes in Thoughts and Mood

- Negative or untrue beliefs about why the trauma happened
- Negative or untrue thoughts about self or the world because of the trauma
- Negative emotional states because of the trauma

Changes in arousal or reactivity

- Jumpiness; being overly on guard
- Concentration problems
- Sleeping difficulties
- Irritability, outbursts of anger

What causes PTS?

PTS is caused by memories of the trauma or what happened afterwards. When strong negative feelings end up connected to the memories, every time the trauma is remembered, the feelings can come back. Avoiding remembering/reminders can seem helpful in the moment, but it keeps the traumatic memories and unhelpful thoughts going.

Is PTS normal?

It is normal to have reactions to trauma. Most people are upset after a trauma. Some have stronger reactions. There are many reasons why some have stronger reactions.

When is PTS a serious problem?

PTS is usually worst right after the trauma and then gradually gets better. After a few weeks or months, most of the time, PTS is not a big problem. When PTS does not get better over time or if it gets worse, then professional help may be necessary. When PTS does not get better over time it can become Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

What helps with PTS?

Understanding the reactions so they do not seem so strange or abnormal.

Having ways of calming down when memories are upsetting.

Keeping in mind that memories cannot really hurt, they are just memories.

Not avoiding situations that are reminders (but safe) and trying to get back to normal.

Making sure that thoughts about what happened are realistic and helpful. Putting the trauma into perspective.

When is professional help needed?

If PTS symptoms persist without getting better or get worse and they are interfering with functioning at home and in the community.

Treatment for PTSD

The good news is there is help for PTSD.

1. Trauma-specific Cognitive Behavioral Treatment (CBT). CETA is a type of trauma-specific CBT. The treatment teaches coping skills, helps with facing up to the trauma memories and putting the trauma into perspective.
2. Antidepressant medicine. These medicines work on the brain and uplift and calm down moods. Medicine is not the main treatment but can be taken along with doing trauma-specific therapy.

Long-term impact of trauma

Traumas are often significant life experiences. Time passing or treatment does not change the fact that they happened or that they were very hard experiences to go through. In some cases there are permanent changes in outlook and lifestyle. This is not always bad. The goal of treatment is to lower distress, help put the experience into perspective and help with return to normal functioning.