

Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress

What is trauma?

A 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. What causes PTS are feelings of threat, fear, horror, extreme helplessness or shame about the trauma. These reactions can occur if the trauma happened to the person, the trauma was witnessed or if the trauma happened to someone very close.

PTS involves being upset or reacting strongly to remembering or being reminded of the trauma, being hyper alert and on guard, trying to avoid thinking about or being reminded of the trauma and/or numbing or shutting down.

What causes PTS?

PTS is caused by the memories of the trauma. When the feelings of threat, fear, shame and other strong negative feelings are connected to the memories, every time the trauma is remembered or there is a reminder, the feelings can come back. Avoiding remembering or being reminded happens because the feelings are very distressing.

Is PTS normal?

It is normal to have reactions to a trauma. Most people are at least somewhat upset after a trauma. Some have stronger reactions. There are many reasons why some have stronger reactions than others. Some of the reasons for stronger reactions are:

- Trauma involved serious danger, injury or death
- Trauma was personally experienced
- During the trauma there were strong feelings of fear or shame
- Past history of trauma
- Past history of psychological problems
- Being female
- Negative reactions from others after the trauma

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 get's worse, then professional help may be necessary. When PTS does not get better over time it can become Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

PTSD is a psychological condition that involves significant distress about trauma memories including nightmares and flashbacks, high levels of hyper vigilance, concentration problems, irritability, and avoiding reminders of the trauma or numbing. The symptoms interfere with functioning in everyday life situations.

What helps with PTS?

It helps to understand the reactions so they do not seem so strange or abnormal. It also helps to have ways of calming down when memories are upsetting. Keeping in mind that memories cannot really hurt because they are just memories is one way to think about it. It also helps to not avoid situations that are reminders and try to get back to normal. Another important strategy is to make sure that thoughts about what happened are realistic and helpful. For some, talking to others about what happened and reactions is helpful, while for others, getting back to normal as soon as possible is most helpful.

Trauma specialists can give helpful suggestions on how to manage PTS including:
Helping with sleep problems
Coping with fears
Overcoming avoidance
Putting the experience into perspective

When is professional help needed?

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

What is the treatment?

There are effective treatments for persistent PTS and PTSD. The counseling treatments are brief (usually 12-20 sessions), structured and trauma-focused. Medication can also be helpful. If you decided to seek treatment, make sure to check that the therapist or doctor is familiar with the evidence-based treatment approaches so that you get the highest quality care.

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.