

Fact sheet: UNDERSTANDING PTSD

What is PTSD?

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a natural emotional reaction to terrible experiences that involve actual or threatened serious harm to oneself or others.¹ When in danger, it is natural to feel afraid. This fear triggers many split-second changes in the body to prepare to defend against the danger or to avoid it. This “fight-or-flight” response is a healthy reaction meant to protect a person from harm. But in PTSD, this reaction is changed or damaged. People who have PTSD may feel stressed or frightened even when they are no longer in danger.²

What Causes PTSD?

Examples of traumatic events can include bombings, rape, torture, death or disappearance of family members or friends, being forced to leave your home, or seeing another person harmed or killed. Other examples of traumatic events are hurricanes, floods or earthquakes. Before coming to Canada, some people – particularly those who have come as refugees — may have lived through events like these.

For some people, the thoughts or memories of these horrible events seriously affect their lives, long after any real danger has passed.¹

What are the Symptoms of PTSD?

PTSD can cause many symptoms. These symptoms can be grouped into three categories²:

1. Re-experiencing symptoms:

- Flashbacks—reliving the trauma over and over, including physical symptoms like a racing heart or sweating
- Bad dreams
- Frightening thoughts.

2. Hyper arousal symptoms:

- Being easily startled
- Feeling tense or “on edge”
- Having difficulty sleeping, and/or having angry outbursts.

3. Avoidance symptoms:

- Staying away from places, events, or objects that are reminders of the experience
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Feeling strong guilt, depression, or worry
- Losing interest in activities that were enjoyable in the past
- Having trouble remembering the dangerous event.

Who Does PTSD Affect?

Anyone can get PTSD at any age. This includes war veterans and survivors of physical and sexual assault, abuse, accidents, disasters, and many other serious events.

Not everyone with PTSD has been through a dangerous event. Some people get PTSD after a friend or family member experiences danger or is harmed. The sudden, unexpected death of a loved one can also cause PTSD.²

The symptoms of PTSD are the same in all cultures. But how these symptoms are described and expressed can change from culture to culture.

Children and adults may not show the same signs of PTSD. Children respond differently to traumatic events, depending on their understanding and age.¹

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As well many people get depressed. Some people may feel dizzy, have chest pains, stomach problems, or get sick often. Other people with PTSD use alcohol or other drugs to help them deal with symptoms. This can develop into a serious problem.

Dealing with the stresses of settlement may be harder for a person who has experienced a traumatic event. Certain situations can trigger flashbacks, memories or feelings. For example, a short power outage might bring back terrible memories and feelings for a person who has lived through power blackouts during war.¹

PTSD usually appears within three months of the event. But sometimes symptoms do not appear for years.



UN Photo/Tim McKulka

Torture is one kind of event that can lead to PTSD. Gaining a sense of control over one's own life is critical to a survivor. Therefore, any support should never take over the newcomer's life; it must always result in empowerment.

While all sufferers of PTSD may experience the aforementioned symptoms, victims of torture face additional repercussions. They may be unwilling to disclose information about their experiences, and may feel suspicious, frightened, or anxious to forget about what has happened. These feelings may discourage them from seeking the help they need. Newcomers may be adversely affected by officials in uniform, signing forms, visiting doctors' offices, being admitted to hospitals or even encountering staff of government agencies.

¹ C.A.M.H.: http://www.camh.net/About_Addiction_Mental_Health/Mental_Health_Information/ptsd_refuges_brochure.html

² N.I.M.H.: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>



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How is PTSD Treated?

The main treatments for people with PTSD are psychotherapy ("talk" therapy), medications, or a combination of both. Everyone is different, so a treatment that works for one person may not work for another. It is important for anyone with PTSD to be treated by a mental health care provider who is experienced with PTSD. Some people with PTSD need to try different treatments to find what works best for their symptoms.²

Trauma counselling or therapy can be done one-on-one or in a group setting, and can be very helpful for people with PTSD. Family counselling and individual treatment can help with relationship troubles.

Psychiatrists and family doctors can prescribe medication for depression, nervousness and sleep problems (common in people with PTSD). Medication works best when a person is also in counselling.¹

If someone with PTSD is going through an ongoing trauma, such as being in an abusive relationship, both of the problems need to be treated. Other ongoing problems can include panic disorder, depression, substance abuse, and feeling suicidal.²

Useful links

Centre for Addiction and Mental Health:

www.camh.net

Canadian Mental Health Association:

<http://cmha.ca>

National Institute of Mental Health:

www.nimh.nih.gov

Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture:

www.ccvvt.org