

Facts About Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened. Traumatic events that can trigger PTSD include violent personal assaults such as rape or mugging, natural or human-caused disasters, accidents, or military combat. PTSD can be extremely disabling. Families of victims can also develop the disorder.

Symptoms of PTSD

Many people with PTSD repeatedly re-experience the ordeal in the form of flashback episodes, memories, nightmares or frightening thoughts, especially when they are exposed to events or objects reminiscent of the trauma. Anniversaries of the event can also trigger symptoms. People with PTSD also experience emotional numbness and sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety, and irritability or outbursts of anger. Feelings of intense guilt are also common. Most people with PTSD try to avoid any reminders or thoughts of the ordeal. PTSD is diagnosed when symptoms last more than one month.

When does PTSD first occur?

PTSD can develop at any age, including in childhood. Symptoms typically begin within three months of a traumatic event, although occasionally they do not begin until years later. Once PTSD occurs, the severity and duration of the illness varies. Some people recover within six months, while others suffer much longer.

Treatments for PTSD

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral therapy, group therapy and exposure therapy, in which the patient gradually and repeatedly relives the frightening experience under controlled conditions to help him work through the trauma. Studies have also shown that medications help ease associated symptoms of depression and anxiety and help promote sleep.

Some studies show that giving people an opportunity to talk about their experiences very soon after a catastrophic event may reduce some of the symptoms of PTSD. A study of 12,000 schoolchildren who lived through a hurricane in Hawaii found that those who got counseling early on were doing much better two years later than those who did not.

Do other illnesses tend to accompany PTSD?

Co-occurring depression, alcohol or other substance abuse, or another anxiety disorder are not uncommon. The likelihood of treatment success is increased when these other conditions are appropriately identified and treated as well.

Headaches, gastrointestinal complaints, immune system problems, dizziness, chest pain or discomfort in other parts of the body are common. Often, doctors treat the symptoms without being aware that they stem from PTSD. When PTSD is diagnosed, referral to a mental health professional who has had experience treating people with the disorder is recommended.

Who is most likely to develop PTSD?

People who have suffered abuse as children or who have had other previous traumatic experiences are more likely to develop the disorder.

It used to be believed that people who tend to be emotionally numb after a trauma were showing a healthy response, but now some researchers suspect that people who experience this emotional distancing may be more prone to PTSD.

Source: The National Institute of Mental Health