

Traumatic events, such as military combat, assault, an accident or a natural disaster, can have long-lasting negative effects. Sometimes our biological responses and instincts, which can be life-saving during a crisis, leave people with ongoing psychological symptoms because they are not integrated into consciousness.

PTSD affects 3.5% of the U.S. adult population—about 7.7 million Americans—but women are more likely to develop the condition than men. About 37% of those cases are classified as severe. While PTSD can occur at any age, the average age of onset is in a person's early 20s.

## Symptoms

The symptoms of PTSD fall into the following categories:

- Intrusive Memories, which can include flashbacks of reliving the moment of trauma, bad dreams and scary thoughts.
- Avoidance, which can include staying away from certain places or objects that are reminders of the traumatic event. A person may also feel numb, guilty, worried or depressed or having trouble remembering the traumatic event.
- Dissociation, which can include out-of-body experiences or feeling that the world is "not real" (derealization).
- Hypervigilance, which can include being startled very easily, feeling tense, trouble sleeping or outbursts of anger.

Over the last 5 years, research on 1–6 year olds found that young children can develop PTSD, and the symptoms are quite different from those of adults. These findings also saw an increase in PTSD diagnoses in young children by more than 8 times when using the newer criteria. Symptoms in young children can include:

- Acting out scary events during playtime.
- Forgetting how/being unable to talk.
- Being excessively clingy with adults.
- Extreme temper tantrums, as well as overly aggressive behavior.

## Diagnosis

Symptoms of PTSD usually begin within 3 months after a traumatic event, but occasionally emerge years afterward. Symptoms must last more than a month to be considered PTSD. PTSD is often accompanied by depression, substance abuse or another anxiety disorder. Because young children have emerging abstract cognitive and limited verbal expression, research indicates that diagnostic criteria needs to be more behaviorally anchored and developmentally sensitive to detect PTSD in preschool children.

## Treatment

**Medications.** There is no one medication that will treat all cases of PTSD. The effective combination of psychotherapy and medication should be used together to reduce its

symptoms. Given the common co-occurrence of depression, related anxiety disorders, aggression and impulsivity, selecting medications that address these related problems is recommended. Common categories of medications include antidepressants, antipsychotics and mood stabilizers.

**Psychotherapy.** People with PTSD respond better to select, structured interventions than to unstructured, supportive psychotherapy. In addition to the following therapies, research is being conducted on dream revision therapy, also known as Imagery Rehearsal Therapy (IRT).

- **Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)** helps change the negative thinking and behavior associated with depression. The goal of this therapy is to recognize negative thoughts and replace them with positive thoughts, which leads to more effective behavior.
- **Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)** is an eclectic psychotherapy intervention designed for trauma that employs exposure to traumatic memories with alternating stimuli (eye movements are one of several options) in structured sessions with an individual certified to perform EMDR.
- **Exposure therapy** helps people safely face what they find frightening so that they can learn to cope with it effectively. For example, virtual reality programs allow a person to experience the situation in which he or she experienced trauma.

Other forms of therapy include the use of service dogs and support groups.

## Complementary and Alternative Methods

Recently, many health care professionals have begun to include alternative treatments into their regimens. Some methods that have been used for PTSD include:

- Yoga
- Aqua therapy, such as floatation chambers and surfing
- Acupuncture
- Mindfulness and meditation

See more at: <http://www.nami.org/Learn-More/Mental-Health-Conditions/Posttraumatic-Stress-Disorder>

*Updated March 2015*