



Info Sheet: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

What is PTSD?

PTSD is an anxiety disorder that some people get after seeing or living through a dangerous event. When in danger, it's 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're no longer in danger.

Signs and Symptoms

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

1. Re-experiencing symptoms:

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

Re-experiencing symptoms may cause problems in a person's everyday routine. They can start from the person's own thoughts and feelings. Words, objects, or situations that are reminders of the event can also trigger re-experiencing.

2. 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.

Things that remind a person of the traumatic event can trigger avoidance symptoms. These symptoms may cause a person to change his or her personal routine. For example, after a bad car accident, a person who usually drives may avoid driving or riding in a car.

3. Hyperarousal symptoms:

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

Hyperarousal symptoms are usually constant, instead of being triggered by things that remind one of the traumatic event. They can make the person feel stressed and angry. These symptoms may make it hard to do daily tasks, such as sleeping, eating, or concentrating.

It's natural to have some of these symptoms after a dangerous event. Sometimes people have very serious symptoms that go away after a few weeks. This is called acute stress disorder, or ASD. When the symptoms last more than a few weeks and become an ongoing problem, they might be PTSD. Some people with PTSD don't show any symptoms for weeks or months.

Source: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>

Tips for Handling an Child with PTSD:

- Reassure children that they are safe and that trustworthy people are in control. As in all things, parents and caregivers are important role models. Your reactions and responses to traumatic events will affect how your children deal with those same events. It is okay to let children know that you are sad or hurt by an event, but, it is important that they see you in control and feel your sense of security and resolve to protect them.
- Spend extra time with the children and help them return to their normal routines as quickly as possible. To help increase a sense of security, try to maintain family schedules for daily activities such as eating, playing, and sleeping. If a child needs more physical contact with you for a period of time, be available. Physical affection is very comforting to children who have experienced trauma.

If possible, avoid unnecessary separations from your children immediately following a traumatic event. Build extra family time into your daily schedule and delay extended time away, such as travel, if at all possible.

- Talk to the children, answer their questions. They may ask— or may be wondering— “Is that going to happen to me?” Or “Is that going to happen to Mommy or Daddy?” These children should be reassured with information about the steps that the adults in their lives are taking to keep them safe. Children may also have questions about death and dying. You should answer their questions as truthfully as possible at a level they can understand.
- Give children the amount of information that you believe they can understand. This often involves turning off news reports of the event and significantly controlling or limiting their exposure to threatening images on TV. In the days after September 11, many families appropriately turned off the television news because the repeated videos of airplanes flying into the World Trade Center towers and horrific scenes around plane crashes were too upsetting for their children. Furthermore, children may not understand what they are viewing. For example, very young children believe re-runs of the event are more events happening around them. In addition to monitoring media images, monitor your conversations about the event, as conversations, too, may be troubling for your children.
- Help children express their feelings. Immediately after a traumatic event, help your child calm down by showing that you can calm yourself. Suggest that the child draw a picture of his or her feelings or use a doll or stuffed animal to talk to, with you, about the event. Listen to the child’s description of events and talk to him or her in a calm, loving way. Sometimes helping your children find a positive way to cope with what has happened can help in the healing process. Examples include sending a special picture to a helper (police, fire, rescue), sending a card or drawing to a child touched by the event, or making something special for the daycare center/classroom.

Source: <http://actagainstviolence.apa.org/materials/publications/act/trauma.pdf>