

How to help someone coping with PTSD

When a person experiences or witnesses a terrifying event, like war, in which they believe they or others are in serious danger, they may be at risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). When someone has PTSD, it changes their life and the lives of the people who care about them.

PTSD is a mental health condition that can happen to anyone. It is not a sign of weakness, and it is not rare. An estimated 354 million adult war survivors globally are coping with PTSD and/or major depression.*

Symptoms of PTSD may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event(s). These symptoms might not go away over time and can make daily life, including work or relationships, very difficult. The person with PTSD may act differently and get angry easily or may not want to do things they used to enjoy, among other potential changes.

As someone who cares about them, you may feel scared and frustrated about the changes you see. You also may feel angry about what's happening or wonder if the individual will ever recover. These feelings and worries are common.

It is important to learn about PTSD so you can understand why it happened, how it is treated and what you can do to help.

Signs and symptoms

Symptoms can start soon after the individual witnesses or experiences the terrifying event or may come months or years later. PTSD can cause different types of symptoms, which can vary over time and from person to person. But symptoms generally are grouped into 4 types: 1) intrusive memories, 2) avoidance, 3) negative changes in thinking and mood and 4) changes in physical and emotional reactions. So, for example, the person may:

- Feel like they're reliving the event through flashbacks, nightmares or memories that feel very real
- Stay away from certain places, objects or people that remind them of the traumatic event
- Blame themselves for the trauma, have a hard time remembering it or feel like the world is a dangerous place
- Feel very on edge, like they're in danger, or feel angry or nervous often

For children ages 6 and younger, signs and symptoms also may include:

- Reenacting the traumatic event or aspects of the traumatic event through play
- Frightening dreams that may or may not include aspects of the traumatic event

* National Library of Medicine, Institute of Psychology, University of Münster, Münster, Germany. The prevalence of PTSD and major depression in the global population of adult war survivors: a meta-analytically informed estimate in absolute numbers. ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6394282. Accessed 20 April 2022.

The stress from PTSD can lead to other problems, like depression or using alcohol or drugs.

Please note: While many of the factors that cause PTSD are not under the individual's control, getting effective treatment after PTSD symptoms develop can be critical to reduce symptoms and improve their day-to-day functioning.

How you can help

You may feel helpless, but there are many things you can do. Here are some ways you can help:

- Learn as much as you can about PTSD. Knowing how PTSD affects people may help you understand what the individual is going through and cope better with it.
- Tell them you want to listen and that you also understand if they don't feel like talking.
- Plan activities together, like having dinner or playing a game.
- Take a walk, go for a bike ride or do some other physical activity together to stimulate the natural 'feel good' hormones and help clear the mind.
- Encourage contact with loved ones. A support system will help the individual get through difficult changes and stressful times.
- Offer to go to support groups or doctor visits with the individual. You can help keep track of appointments and be there for support.

The individual may not want your help. If this happens, keep in mind that withdrawal can be a symptom of PTSD. A person who withdraws may not feel like talking, taking part in group activities or being around other people. Give the person some space, but tell them you are ready to help.

Dealing with angry or violent behaviour

The individual may feel angry about many things. Anger is a normal reaction to trauma, but it can hurt relationships and make it difficult to think clearly. Anger also can be frightening. If anger leads to violent behaviour or abuse, it's dangerous. Go to a safe place and call for help straight away. Make sure that children are in a safe place as well.

It's hard to talk to someone who is angry. One thing you can do is set up a time-out system. This helps you find a way to talk even while angry. Here's one way to do this:

- Agree that either of you can call a time-out at any time.
- Agree that when someone calls a time-out, the discussion must stop right then.
- Decide on a signal you will use to call a time-out. The signal can be a word that you say or a hand signal.
- Agree to tell each other where you will be and what you will be doing during the time-out. Tell each other what time you will come back.

While you are taking a time-out, don't focus on how angry you feel. Instead, think calmly about how you will talk things over and solve the problem.

After you come back:

- Take turns talking about solutions to the problem. Listen without interrupting.
- Use statements starting with 'I', such as 'I think' or 'I feel'. Using 'you' statements can sound accusing.
- Be open to each other's ideas. Don't criticise each other.
- Focus on things you both think will work. It's likely you will both have good ideas.
- Together, agree which solutions you will use.

Improve communication

If you and the person with PTSD have trouble talking about feelings, worries and everyday problems, here are some ways to communicate better:

- Be clear and to the point.
- Be positive. Blame and negative talk won't help the situation.
- Be a good listener. Don't argue or interrupt. Repeat what you hear to make sure that you understand, and ask questions if you need to know more.
- Put your feelings into words. The individual may not know you are sad or frustrated unless you are clear about your feelings.
- Help them put feelings into words. Ask, 'Are you feeling angry? Sad? Worried?'
- Ask how you can help.
- Don't give advice unless you are asked.

Take care of yourself

Changes are stressful. Taking care of yourself can help make it easier to cope and maintain your own health and wellness:

- Remind yourself that nobody has all the answers. It's normal to feel helpless at times.
- Don't feel badly if things change slowly. You cannot change anyone. People have to change themselves.
- Don't give up your outside life. Make time for activities and hobbies you enjoy. Continue to see your friends.
- Take time to be by yourself. Find a quiet place to gather your thoughts and 'recharge'.
- Remember the good things. It's easy to get weighed down by worry and stress. But don't forget to see and celebrate the good things that have happened and are happening in your life.

Get support

During difficult times, it is important to have people in your life who you can depend on. These people are your support network. They can help you with everyday jobs, like taking a child to school, or by giving you care and understanding. Reach out to loved ones, support groups and organisations, as well as health care professionals for help.



Critical support when you need it

Visit optumwellbeing.com/criticalsupportcenter for additional critical support resources and information.

Author: Healthwise Staff Medical Review. Adam Husney MD, Family Medicine, Kathleen Romito MD, Family Medicine, Jessica Hamblen PhD, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Sources

1. PTSD: National Center for PTSD. How common is PTSD in adults? ptsd.va.gov/understand/common/index.asp. Accessed 20 April 2022.
2. NAMI. Posttraumatic stress disorder. [nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Mental-Health-Conditions/Posttraumatic-Stress-Disorder](https://www.nami.org/About-Mental-Illness/Mental-Health-Conditions/Posttraumatic-Stress-Disorder). Accessed 20 April 2022.



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