

Signs and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder

When someone witnesses or experiences the shocking and deeply distressing events of war and fears that their or other people's lives are in danger, they may be at risk for developing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

PTSD is a mental health condition that affects hundreds of millions of war survivors globally.* Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares and severe anxiety, as well as uncontrollable thoughts about the event(s) an individual has seen or endured. 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.

PTSD symptoms can vary in intensity, over time and from person to person. A person may have more symptoms when they are stressed in general or if they come across reminders of what they went through. For example, they may hear a car backfire or see a news report and relive memories of combat experiences, fleeing their home or saying goodbye to a loved one.



PTSD symptoms are generally grouped into 4 types:

Intrusive memories may include:

- Recurrent, unwanted and distressing memories of the traumatic event
- Reliving the traumatic event as if it were happening again (flashbacks)
- Upsetting dreams or nightmares about the traumatic event
- Severe emotional distress or physical reactions to something that reminds you of the traumatic event

Avoidance may include:

- Trying to avoid thinking or talking about the traumatic event
- Avoiding places, activities or people that remind you of the traumatic event

Negative changes in thinking and mood may include:

- Negative thoughts about yourself, other people or the world
- Hopelessness about the future
- Memory problems, including not remembering important aspects of the traumatic event

* Hoppen, T. H., & Morina, N. The prevalence of PTSD and major depression in the global population of adult war survivors: a meta-analytically informed estimate in absolute numbers. *Eur J Psychotraumatol.* 2019; 10(1): 1578637. doi.org/10.1080/20008198.2019.1578637. ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6394282. Accessed 20 April 2022.

- Difficulty maintaining close relationships
- Feeling detached from family and friends
- Lack of interest in activities you once enjoyed
- Difficulty experiencing positive emotions
- Feeling emotionally numb

Changes in physical and emotional reactions (also called arousal symptoms) may include:

- Being easily startled or frightened
- Always being on guard for danger
- Self-destructive behaviour, such as drinking too much or driving too fast
- Trouble sleeping
- Trouble concentrating
- Irritability, angry outbursts or aggressive behaviour
- Overwhelming guilt or shame



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

The stress from PTSD also can lead to other problems, like depression, or using alcohol or drugs. For many people, PTSD symptoms will begin to lessen over time, and the person will think less and less about the traumatic event(s). However, working through trauma and healing can take time. If possible, it is important for the individual to do what they can to care for themselves during especially difficult circumstances. Some considerations for how to do this include:

- Keeping in contact and connected with loved ones
- Asking for and accepting help and contributions from others, including with regard to essential resources, health and well-being
- Avoiding further exposure to traumatic events, such as by limiting access to news reports and social media. (Repeatedly hearing about or seeing images of something traumatic can be upsetting and trigger symptoms.)
- Seeking help from in-person or online support groups, mental health professionals or counsellors

While many of the factors that cause PTSD are not under an individual's control, getting effective treatment after PTSD symptoms develop can be critical to reduce symptoms and improve their day-to-day functioning. If the symptoms endure for more than a month and/or grow worse, the individual should consult with a medical or mental health care professional or reach out to a support group or organisation that can connect them to mental health services.



Critical support when you need it

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

Sources

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