

Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Note: Recently Post-traumatic Stress Disorder has been re-classified as a trauma or stress-related disorder instead of an anxiety disorder. This might help de-stigmatize PTSD since it is no longer an anxiety-related mental illness but a disorder caused by an external event.

Definition: Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a disorder that is triggered by a terrifying event that was either experienced or witnessed. Symptoms must last at least one month, seriously affect one's ability to function, and can't be due to substance abuse, medical illness, or anything except the event itself in order to be diagnosed as Post-traumatic Stress Disorder. This diagnosis is indicated for people ages 6 and older. There is now pre-school criteria for those younger than 6.

Symptoms: The symptoms are defined by criteria as follows with one or two of the symptoms needing to be present under the criteria.

Criteria A: Traumatic event

- Must have been threatened with or exposed to actual death, serious injury, or sexual violence
- Exposure can be direct, witnessed, indirect (through relative or close friend who experienced the event), repeated or extreme indirect exposure to event

Criteria B: Intrusion or Re-experiencing

- Intrusive thoughts or memories
- Nightmares related to the traumatic event
- Flashbacks, feeling like the event is happening again
- Psychological and physical reactions to reminders of the event, such as the anniversary

Criteria C: Avoidant Symptoms

- Avoiding thoughts or feelings about the traumatic event
- Avoiding people or situations related to the traumatic event

Criteria D: Negative alterations in mood

- Memory problems that are exclusive to the event
- Negative beliefs about one's self or the world
- Distorted sense of blame for one's self or others related to the event
- Being stuck in severe emotions related to the trauma such as, horror, shame, sadness

- Severely reduced interest in pre-trauma activities
- Feeling isolated, detached, or disconnected from other people

Criteria E: Increased arousal symptoms (wary, on edge, watchful for further threats)

- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability, increased temper or anger
- Difficulty falling or staying asleep
- Hypervigilance
- Being easily startled

Disassociation is separate from symptoms but can be seen in people with PTSD such as: depersonalization or feeling disconnected from one's self; derealization, a sense that one's surroundings aren't real.

Causes: Although doctors aren't sure why some people get PTSD, it is probably caused by a complex mix of inherited mental health risks, life experiences (especially if there was trauma since early childhood), a person's personality or temperament, and possibly how the brain regulates chemicals and hormones the body releases in response to stress.

Treatment: The primary treatment for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder is psychotherapy, but often includes medication. Several types of psychotherapy (or talk therapy) are used and can work in combination, such as: Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy, Exposure Therapy, and Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). Group therapy can also be effective. Medications that can be helpful include: antidepressants, short-term use of anti-anxiety drugs, and insomnia medication, if required.