

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder



The Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA) is a national 501 (c)3 nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote the prevention, treatment and cure of anxiety disorders and to improve the lives of all people who suffer from them. Help ADAA help others. Donate now at www.adaa.org.

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“ I go through the motions every day, but I don't feel anything or want to be around anyone. I can't focus. I have checked out, emotionally. I have never felt more alone or helpless. ”

What Is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

Many of us have witnessed or experienced a traumatic event – the loss of a loved one, a serious illness or accident or a personal assault. With time, the grief passes, the pain lessens and life eventually gets back to normal. While most will recover from traumatic events, some people continue to be severely distressed and anxious for months or even years. They frequently re-live the event through flashbacks or nightmares. Relaxing, concentrating or sleeping may become difficult. They often feel detached or estranged from loved ones. These people may have Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

PTSD is a serious, potentially debilitating condition that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a life-threatening event, such as a natural disaster, serious accident, terrorist incident, sudden death of a loved one, war or violent personal assault, like rape. It is characterized by three main types of symptoms: re-experiencing the trauma through intrusive distressing recollections of the event, flashbacks and nightmares; emotional numbness and avoidance of places, people and activities that are reminders of the trauma; increased arousal including difficulty sleeping and concentrating, feeling jumpy, easily irritated and angered. PTSD is diagnosed after at least one month following the traumatic event. Before that time, people may experience various symptoms that may indicate that they are at risk to develop this disorder. Sometimes though, these symptoms do not appear until several months or even years later.

About Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety is a normal part of living. It's the body's way of telling us something isn't right. It keeps us from harm's way and prepares us to act quickly in the face of danger. However, for some people, anxiety is persistent, irrational and overwhelming. It may get in the way of day-to-day activities and even make them impossible. This may be a sign of an anxiety disorder.

The term "anxiety disorders" describes a group of conditions including generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, **posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**, social anxiety disorder (SAD) and specific phobias. For information on all of the anxiety disorders visit www.adaa.org.

What's the difference between normal anxiety following a traumatic event & PTSD?

Normal Anxiety

1. Frightening thoughts and images, difficulty falling asleep or concentrating, feeling jumpy and agitated for days or a few weeks following a physical assault after which one regains one's prior emotional state.
2. Wanting to spend time alone, staying away from reminders of the person, not wanting to participate in activities with family/friends immediately after witnessing the sudden death of a loved one. This is also time limited, usually resolving within several weeks.
3. Feeling frightened, angry, agitated after losing personal possessions during a life-threatening storm.

PTSD

1. Chronic, unrelenting, intrusive memories, flashbacks, nightmares or sudden floods of emotions long after the trauma.
2. Avoiding, at all costs, situations or activities that are reminders of the person who died, loss of interest in everything, withdrawing from family/friends for months or years.
3. Severe and recurrent anger, jumpiness, insomnia, lack of concentration long after witnessing a natural disaster.

How can PTSD affect your life?

Mentally re-living a traumatic event can be as stressful and frightening to people suffering with PTSD as the original event. In addition to the physical and psychological symptoms, there is often embarrassment, confusion and frustration. Even though the disorder has very specific symptoms, PTSD is often misunderstood or misdiagnosed. It often places a strain on relationships, as many people will isolate and detach themselves from family, friends and activities they once enjoyed.

Women are twice as likely to develop PTSD as men. PTSD often occurs with depression, substance abuse or other anxiety disorders.

What causes PTSD?

We do not know why some people develop PTSD after a traumatic event and others do not. We know that the more severe, long lasting or dangerous the trauma, the more vulnerable the person is to developing PTSD. Traumas caused by other people, such as rape, war or assault, are also more likely to result in PTSD.

What treatments are available?

Not everyone who experiences trauma requires treatment. Many people recovering from a trauma are able to be helped by family members/friends/clergy and with time. However, if symptoms persist beyond a few weeks it is important to seek professional help. Fortunately, most individuals who seek treatment for PTSD and other anxiety disorders see significant improvement and enjoy a better quality of life. A variety of treatment options exist including cognitive-behavioral therapy, exposure therapy, anxiety management and medications. One, or a combination of these, may be recommended. Details about these treatments are available on the ADAA website at www.adaa.org.

It is important to remember that there is no single "right" treatment. What works for one person may or may not be the best choice for someone else. A course of treatment should be tailored to your individual needs. Ask your doctor to explain why a particular type of treatment is being recommended, what other options are available and what you need to do to fully participate in your recovery.



“I was so relieved when my doctor put a name to my problem. To discover that there are other people like me. To learn that there is hope.”

As an American veteran, where can I go for help?

Your local VA Hospital or Veterans Center can refer you to a specialist. You can also call the VA Health Benefits Service Center toll free at 1-877-222-VETS or go online to Specialized PTSD Treatment Programs, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, http://www.ncptsd.va.gov/facts/veterans/fs_treatment_programs.html. The National Center for PTSD at www.ncptsd.va.gov has many resources for veterans and their families.

There is a special military screening program which provides free, anonymous mental health and alcohol self-assessments to military family members, service members and vets on a 24/7 basis at www.MilitaryMentalHealth.org.

How can ADAA help you?

Suffering from PTSD or any anxiety disorder can interfere with many aspects of your life. ADAA can give you the resources that will help you and your loved ones better understand your condition, connect you with a community of people who know what you are experiencing and assist you in finding mental health professionals in your city who can help. Visit the ADAA website at www.adaa.org to locate doctors and therapists who treat PTSD and other anxiety disorders in your area, as well as local support groups. Learn about the causes, symptoms and best treatments for all of the anxiety disorders, review questions to ask a therapist or doctor and find helpful books, tapes and other materials to help family and loved ones. ADAA is here to help you make the best decisions so that you can get on with your life.

Take Five & Manage Your Anxiety

You are not alone. Talk to someone – a friend, loved one or doctor. Get help. Anxiety disorders are real, serious and treatable.

Whether you have normal anxiety or an anxiety disorder, these strategies will help you cope:

Exercise.
Go for a walk or jog.
Do yoga.
Dance. Just get moving!

Talk to someone ... spouse, significant other, friend, child or doctor.

Keep a daily journal.
Become aware of what triggers your anxiety.

Eat a balanced diet. Don't skip meals. Avoid caffeine which can trigger anxiety symptoms.

Contact ADAA at www.adaa.org.
Let us help you help yourself.

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Self-Test

If you think you might have PTSD, take the test below. Answer "yes" or "no" to the questions and discuss the results with your doctor.

Y N Have you experienced or witnessed a life threatening event that caused intense fear, helplessness or horror?

Do you re-experience the event in at least one of the following ways:

Y N Repeated, distressing memories and/or dreams?

Y N Acting or feeling as if the event were happening again (flashbacks or a sense of reliving it)?

Y N Intense physical and/or emotional distress when you are exposed to things that remind you of the event?

Do you avoid reminders of the event and feel numb, compared to the way you felt before, in three or more of the following ways:

Y N Avoiding thoughts, feelings or conversations about it?

Y N Avoiding activities, places or people who remind you of it?

Y N Blanking on important parts of it?

Y N Losing interest in significant activities of your life?

Y N Feeling detached from other people?

Y N Sensing that your future has shrunk (i.e., you don't expect to have a career, marriage, children or a normal life span)?

Y N Feeling your range of emotions is restricted?

Are you troubled by one or more of the following:

Y N Problems sleeping?

Y N Irritability or outbursts of anger?

Y N Problems concentrating?

Y N Feeling "on guard"?

Y N An exaggerated startle response?

Y N Do your symptoms interfere with your daily life?

Y N Have your symptoms lasted at least one month?

Having more than one illness at the same time can make it difficult to diagnose and treat the different conditions. Conditions that sometimes complicate anxiety disorders include depression and substance abuse, among others.

Yes or no? During the last year, have you experienced:

Y N Changes in sleeping or eating habits?

Y N Feeling sad or depressed more days than not?

Y N A disinterest in life more days than not?

Y N A feeling of worthlessness or guilt more days than not?

During the last year, has the use of alcohol or drugs:

Y N Resulted in failure with work, school or family?

Y N Placed you in a dangerous situation, such as driving under the influence?

Y N Gotten you arrested?

Y N Continued despite causing problems for you and/or your loved ones?