

# Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

## What is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the development of symptoms following exposure to a traumatic event. Any kind of extreme stress can lead to development of PTSD. Typically, it involves direct personal experience surrounding death or serious injury, witnessing a stressful event, or learning about an unexpected or violent death or injury to a loved one.

Traumatic events that can be experienced directly include assaults, serious car accidents, natural disasters such as an earthquake, personal assaults and abuse, terrorist attacks, and military combat.

You don't have to be hurt to experience PTSD. Witnessing any type of personal or environmental disaster, being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, or being threatened with violence or being hurt can lead to PTSD.

Most people feel stressed after going through something traumatic. Strong emotions; feeling easily irritated; jitters; and trouble sleeping, eating, or concentrating can all be part of a typical and temporary reaction to an overwhelming event. Also, frequent thoughts and images of what happened, nightmares, or fears can be a part of recovering from stress. These may or may not be signs of PTSD.

When someone has PTSD, the symptoms of stress are intense and last for longer than a month. For some people, the symptoms of PTSD begin soon after the trauma, but others have a delayed response.

## What are the Symptoms of PTSD?

PTSD has certain characteristic symptoms that usually develop within three months of the traumatic event. People with PTSD generally experience some or all of these symptoms:

- **Reliving the traumatic event.** People with PTSD might have nightmares, flashbacks, or disturbing mental images about the trauma.
- **Avoiding reminders of the trauma.** People with PTSD may avoid people, places, or activities that remind them of the stressful event. They may also avoid talking about what happened.
- **Emotional numbness.** Many people with PTSD feel numb or detached; they may not feel the same way about other people or the world as they did before. This could be caused by the overproduction of certain chemicals that block sensation during extreme stress.
- **Hypervigilance.** People with PTSD may be easily startled, on edge, jumpy, irritable, or tense. This may be due to high levels of stress hormones in the body. Difficulty concentrating and trouble sleeping may also be part of this hyper-alert state.

