

Treating Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

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There are 2 main ways of treating a person with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD): psychotherapy and medication.

Therapy

Therapy provides several benefits for people with PTSD. The therapeutic environment provides a safe place for people to go and discuss the traumatic event, their fears and reactions to the event, and their symptoms. This feeling of safety—where anything can be discussed regardless of how shocking or painful—is a way for people with PTSD to begin to reestablish a sense of trust with others. This is especially true for individual therapy (between one person and a therapist) and group therapy, where people who have experienced similar events come together to discuss their symptoms, learn more about PTSD, and provide support for each other.

Therapy also helps people with PTSD learn to manage their symptoms. In particular, cognitive-behavioral therapy can be helpful with symptom management. This type of therapy helps people better understand how their actions or behaviors are related to their mental processing of external stimuli. A person works with the therapist to discover learned behaviors and irrational thought patterns, as well as ways to develop more appropriate and healthy behaviors and thought patterns. A person may also work with the therapist on particular exercises (gradually exposing themselves, for example, to situations that remind them of the trauma) that ultimately help to reduce anxiety.

Medication

Medication is another mode of treatment for people with PTSD. PTSD can be thought of as a false alarm that is set in motion by a traumatic event. Symptoms then continue to be triggered unnecessarily (for example, a person may experience a flashback when being reminded of the trauma), because of the biological and psychological dysfunctions that follow the trauma. Certain medications can be used to switch off this false alarm.

“Tranquilizers” are often prescribed for people who have experienced trauma or stress. However, the most helpful medications for PTSD are certain kinds of antidepressants. The term “antidepressants” is not a particularly good one in this context, as these medications work by decreasing the PTSD symptoms. Antidepressants have an added advantage in that they are useful for the co-occurring anxiety or depression symptoms that are common in people with PTSD. There are several different types of antidepressants, and a person needs to work with his doctor to find the type of antidepressant that best alleviates his symptoms.

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