

## Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (reviewed Jan. 17, 2012)

Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that develops after exposure to a traumatic event, such as a violent attack, an accident or a natural disaster. The person may experience the traumatic event directly, may witness an event that involves other people or may learn about a traumatic event that happened to a family member or close friend.

Whether the traumatic event is experienced, witnessed or learned of, one of the defining characteristics of PTSD is that the event involves the actual or perceived threat of serious injury or death to the person or others. In addition, the person who experienced, witnessed, or learned of the traumatic event, reacts to it with intense fear, helplessness or horror.

Traumatic events can include, but are not limited to, the following:

- human violence (e.g., rape, physical assault, domestic violence, kidnapping or violence associated with military combat)
- natural disasters (e.g., floods, earthquakes, tornadoes or hurricanes)
- accidents involving injury or death
- sudden, unexpected death of a family member or friend
- diagnosis of a life threatening illness

It should be emphasized that most people who are exposed to traumatic events do not develop PTSD. Furthermore, many people with symptoms (such as difficulty falling asleep) after a trauma show gradual improvement with time. However, in some cases, PTSD symptoms continue and negatively impact on the person's life (for example, impairing their work, their studies or their relationships with others). In such cases, PTSD may be present.

Persons with PTSD display three types of symptoms:

- *Intrusive re-experiencing symptoms* are when a person has memories, flashbacks or nightmares of the event(s).
- *Avoidant or numbing symptoms* are when a person withdraws from people or activities that are reminders of the traumatic event.
- *Hyperarousal symptoms* are when a person is easily startled, irritable, on edge or has trouble falling asleep.

When children have PTSD, symptoms are expressed in different ways. For example, children may re-experience the traumatic event through repetitive play (e.g., a child who witnessed a robbery may reenact the robbery again and again using her toys).

Scientists have suggested that PTSD tends to be more intense and lasts longer when the traumatic event involves human violence. They have also found good evidence that the likelihood of developing PTSD increases with the severity, length and proximity of exposure to the traumatic event.

According to The American Psychiatric Association's official diagnostic manual, a person has chronic PTSD if symptoms last for three months or longer. When PTSD symptoms last less than three months, this is considered acute PTSD. It may also be noted that in some people, PTSD symptoms can begin long after the traumatic event. This is termed delayed-onset PTSD.

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