

Post-traumatic stress disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (also known as PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that occurs as a response to severe stress involving actual or threatened death or a threat to one's physical integrity. Among the events that can trigger PTSD are car accidents, assaults, witnessing death or serious physical injury, military combat. Those trigger intense fear or horror or psychological numbness. Many people are exposed to this type of situations but only some will develop what is called post-traumatic stress. Why? It probably depends on genetic makeup and general resilience of a person. Some people are more prone to emotional pathology than others.

PTSD usually closely follows psychological trauma but sometimes begins long after it. It presents with the variety of symptoms. Patients frequently have nightmares about the traumatic situation or re-experience it in a form of vivid flashbacks. Flashbacks can be triggered by anything that brings back the memories of the event – sounds, smells, particular surroundings. They can be accompanied by sweating, palpitations and muscular tension. Traumatic memories can be intrusive and hard to suppress.

People who suffer from PTSD would avoid situations that will bring up those memories. For instance, war veterans may avoid watching war movies; rape victims may refuse to discuss what had happened to them; for some people it is difficult to recall parts of the trauma. With this condition, patients may have a sense of estrangement from others, experience decreased interest in activities, and have a sense of foreshortened future.

Victims of PTSD also would frequently feel on edge, be irritable and jumpy, have a hard time sleeping, and experience problems with concentration and mental focusing.

Post-traumatic stress can last a few weeks or a few months; at times it can be chronic and can still be present many years after the triggering episode. In severe cases, it can be debilitating, profoundly affecting a person's ability to function in the family and in the workplace. Many people with PTSD resort to alcohol and drugs to cope with their symptoms; those then become problems on their own.

PTSD is treatable, albeit not always curable. Treatment options consist of medications that are usually more effective if combined with individual or group psychotherapy. Medications that have shown to be most effective are antidepressants with anti-anxiety effect, such as SSRI's (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors); some antihypertensive drugs can also be helpful; some psychotropic drugs from other classes have been shown to work as well. The use of tranquilizers is controversial. There is evidence that medications like Xanax or Ativan may actually worsen PTSD in the long haul. Family support is crucial. Substance abuse treatment should also be provided if necessary. Untreated drug addiction and alcohol problem make the symptoms of PTSD worse and more resistant to treatment.

Leonid Remenson, MD