

# PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) in Older Adults: A Guide for Patients & Families

---

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can occur after experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event. In older adults, PTSD may be related to earlier life experiences such as military combat, accidents, loss, or trauma that occurred many years ago. Symptoms can sometimes re-emerge later in life, especially during times of stress, illness, or life transitions. With proper support and treatment, many people can experience meaningful relief and improved quality of life.

## Common Symptoms of PTSD

- Intrusive memories or flashbacks
- Nightmares or distressing dreams
- Avoidance of reminders of the trauma
- Increased anxiety or hypervigilance
- Irritability or anger
- Difficulty sleeping
- Emotional numbness or withdrawal

## How PTSD May Present in Older Adults

- Increased anxiety related to health or safety
- Sleep disturbances or nightmares
- Heightened startle response
- Withdrawal from social activities
- Depression or feelings of hopelessness
- Re-emergence of past trauma memories

## Triggers That May Worsen Symptoms

- Medical illness or hospitalization
- Loss of independence
- Anniversary dates of traumatic events
- Changes in environment or routine
- Sensory reminders such as sounds, smells, or images

## Treatment Options

### Psychotherapy

- Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

- Supportive therapy
- Exposure-based therapies
- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

### Medication Options

- Antidepressants such as SSRIs may be helpful
- Medications for sleep disturbances may be considered
- Medication choices are carefully adjusted in older adults

### Ways Families Can Help


- Listen with patience and without judgment
- Encourage professional help
- Support consistent routines and sleep habits
- Help identify and reduce triggers when possible
- Stay connected and provide reassurance

### When to Seek Professional Help

- Symptoms interfere with daily functioning
- Severe anxiety or depression develops
- Sleep problems become persistent
- There are thoughts of self-harm or worsening distress

## National Organizations & Resources

✓ National Center for PTSD (VA)

 [ptsd.va.gov](https://ptsd.va.gov)

✓ National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

 [nimh.nih.gov](https://nimh.nih.gov)

✓ National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)

 1-800-950-NAMI |  [nami.org](https://nami.org)

✓ Eldercare Locator

 1-800-677-1116 |  [eldercare.acl.gov](https://eldercare.acl.gov)

## Final Notes

- PTSD can affect older adults even many years after a traumatic event.
- Symptoms are treatable with the right support and care.
- Families play an important role in recognizing symptoms and encouraging treatment.