

Family Shelter Service

605 EAST ROOSEVELT ROAD • WHEATON, ILLINOIS 60187 • HOTLINE: (630) 469-5650

⚠ **POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)** ⚠

by Eve B. Carlson, Ph.D. and Joseph Ruzek, Ph.D. for National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Sometimes, when people find themselves suddenly in a dangerous or traumatic situation, they are overcome with feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror. Common traumatic experiences include being physically attacked, being in a serious accident, being in combat, being sexually assaulted, and being in a fire or a disaster like a hurricane or a tornado.

After traumatic experiences, people can find themselves having problems that they didn't have before the event. If these problems are severe and the survivor does not get help for them, they can begin to cause problems. The name for this cluster of problems is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

How Do Traumatic Experiences Affect People?

People who go through traumatic experiences often have symptoms and problems afterwards. How serious the symptoms and problems are depends on many things, including a person's life experiences before the trauma, a person's own natural ability to cope with stress, how serious the trauma was, and what kinds of help and support a person gets from family, friends, and professionals immediately following the trauma.

Because most trauma survivors don't know how trauma usually affects people, they often have trouble understanding what is happening to them. They may think it is their fault that the trauma happened, that they are going crazy, or that there is something wrong with them because other people who were there don't seem to have the same problems. They may turn to drugs or alcohol to make them feel better. They may turn away from friends and family who don't seem to understand.

They may not know what they can do to get better.

What Do Trauma Survivors Need to Know?

- Traumas happen to many competent, healthy, strong, good people. No one can completely protect themselves from traumatic experiences.
- Many people have long-lasting problems following exposure to trauma. Up to 8% of persons will have PTSD at some time in their lives.
- People who react to traumas are not going crazy. What is happening to them is part of a set of common symptoms and problems that are connected with being in a traumatic situation.
- Having symptoms after a traumatic event is not a sign of personal weakness. Many psychologically well-adjusted and physically healthy people develop PTSD. Given exposure to a trauma that is bad enough, probably all people would develop PTSD.
- By understanding trauma symptoms better, a person can become less fearful of them and better able to manage them.
- By recognizing the effects of trauma and knowing more about symptoms, a person will be better able to decide about getting treatment.

What are Common Basic Effects of Trauma?

Because they get overwhelmed with fear during a trauma, survivors often have particular symptoms that begin soon after the traumatic experience. The main symptoms are re-experiencing of the trauma - mentally and physically - and avoidance of trauma reminders. Together, these symptoms create a problem that is called Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is a specific set of problems resulting from a traumatic experience that is recognized by medical and mental health professionals.

Re-experiencing Symptoms:

Trauma survivors commonly continue re-experiencing their traumas. Re-experiencing means that the survivor continues to have the same mental, emotional, and physical experiences that occurred during or just after the trauma. This includes thinking about the trauma, seeing images of the event, feeling agitated, and having physical sensations like those that occurred during the trauma. Trauma survivors find themselves feeling and acting as if the trauma is happening again: feeling as if they are in danger, experiencing panic sensations, wanting to escape, getting angry, thinking about attacking or harming someone else. Because they are anxious and physically agitated, they may have trouble sleeping and trouble concentrating. These experiences are not usually voluntary; the survivor usually can't control them or stop them from happening.

Mentally re-experiencing the trauma can include:

- Upsetting memories such as images or other thoughts about the trauma.
- Feeling as if the trauma is happening again (called flashbacks).

- Bad dreams and nightmares.
- Upset when reminded of the trauma (something the person sees, hears, feels, smells, tastes).
- Anxiety or fear - feeling in danger again.
- Anger or aggressive feelings – feeling the need to defend oneself.
- Trouble controlling emotions because reminders lead to sudden anxiety, anger, or upset.
- Trouble concentrating or thinking clearly.

Physical reactions to trauma reminders such as:

- Trouble falling or staying asleep.
- Feeling agitated and constantly on the lookout for danger.
- Getting very startled by loud noises.
- Becoming startled by something or someone coming up on you from behind you.
- Feeling shaky and sweaty.
- Having your heart pound or having trouble breathing.

Because they have these upsetting feelings, trauma survivors often act as if they are in danger again when they get stressed or reminded of their trauma. They might get overly concerned about keeping safe in situations that really aren't very dangerous. For example, a person living in a good neighborhood might still feel that he has to have an alarm system, double locks on the door, a locked fence, and a guard dog. Because traumatized people often feel like they are in danger even when they aren't, they may be overly aggressive, lashing out to protect themselves when there is no need. For example, a person who was attacked might be quick to yell at or hit someone who seems to be threatening. This happens because, when threatened, people have a natural physical "fight or flight" reaction that prepares them to respond to them danger.

Although reexperiencing symptoms are unpleasant, they are a sign that the body and mind are actively struggling to cope with the traumatic experience. These symptoms are automatic, learned responses to trauma reminders: trauma has become associated with lots of things so that they remind the person of the trauma and give them feeling that they are in danger again. It is also possible that reexperiencing symptoms are actually part of the mind's attempt to make sense of what has happened.

Avoidance Symptoms:

Because thinking about the trauma and feeling as if you are in danger is so upsetting, people who have been through traumas want to avoid reminders of trauma. Sometimes they are aware of this and avoid trauma reminders on purpose and sometimes they do it without realizing what they are doing.

- Ways of avoiding thoughts, feelings, and sensations associated with the trauma can include:
- Actively avoiding trauma-related thoughts and memories.
- Avoiding conversations about the trauma.
- Staying away from places, activities, or people that might remind you of trauma.
- Trouble remembering important parts of what happened during the trauma.
- "Shutting down" emotionally or feeling emotionally numb.
- Trouble having loving feelings or feeling any strong emotions.
- Finding that things around you seem strange or unreal.
- Feeling strange or "not yourself".
- Feeling disconnected from the world around you and things that happen to you.
- Avoiding situations that might make you have a strong emotional reaction.

- Feeling weird physical sensations.
- Feeling physically numb.
- Not feeling pain or other sensations.
- Losing interest in things you used to enjoy doing.

Avoiding thinking about trauma or avoiding treatment for your trauma-related problems may keep a person from feeling upset in the short run. But avoiding treatment of continuing trauma symptoms prevents progress on coping with trauma so that people's trauma symptoms don't go away.

What are Common Secondary and Associated Post-Traumatic Symptoms?

Secondary symptoms are problems that come about because of having post-traumatic re-experiencing and avoidance symptoms. For example: because a person wants to avoid talking about a traumatic event that happened, she might get cut off from friends and begin to feel lonely and depressed. As time passes after a traumatic experience, more and more secondary symptoms may develop. Over time, secondary symptoms can become more troubling and disabling than the original re-experiencing and avoidance symptoms.

Associated symptoms are problems that don't come directly from being overwhelmed with fear, but happen because of other things that were going on at the time of the trauma. For example: a person who gets psychologically traumatized in a car accident might also get physically injured and then get depressed because he can't work or leave the house.

Symptoms of secondary or associated trauma:

- ♦ **Depression:** can happen when a person has losses connected with the trauma or when a person avoids other people and becomes isolated.
- ♦ **Despair and hopelessness:** can result when a person is afraid they will never feel better again.

- ♦ **Loss of faith/ beliefs:** trauma can make people lose faith that the world is a good and safe place.
- ♦ **Aggressive behavior toward oneself or others:** can happen due to frustration over the inability to control PTSD symptoms (feeling they "run your life"). The unfairness of the trauma may also make the person angry. Some people may be have prior difficulty coping with angry feelings and resort to lashing out.
- ♦ **Self-blame, guilt, and shame:** can happen when PTSD symptoms make it hard to fulfill current responsibilities. It can also happen when people fall into the common trap of second-guessing what they did or didn't do at the time of a trauma. Many people, in trying to make sense of their experience, blame themselves. This is usually completely unfair. At best, it fails to take into account the other reasons why the events occurred. Self-blame causes a lot of distress and can prevent a person from reaching out for help.
- ♦ **Problems in relationships with people:** can happen because people who have been through traumas often have a hard time feeling close to people or trusting people. This may be especially likely to happen when the trauma was caused or worsened by other people.
- ♦ **Feeling detached or disconnected from others:** can happen when a person has difficulty in feeling or expressing positive feelings. After traumas, people can get wrapped up in their problems or get numb and then stop putting energy into their relationships with friends and family.
- ♦ **Less interest or participation in things the person used to like to do:** can happen because of depression following a trauma. Spending less time doing fun things and being with people means a person has less of a chance to feel good and have pleasant interactions.
- ♦ **Problems with identity:** can happen when PTSD symptoms

change important things in a person's life, like relationships or whether a person can do your work well. It can also happen when other things that happened at the time of trauma make a person confused about their own identity. For instance a person who thinks of himself as unselfish might think he acted selfishly by saving himself during a disaster. This might make him question whether he is really who he thought he was.

- ♦ **Feeling permanently damaged:** can happen when trauma symptoms don't go away and a person doesn't think they will get better.
- ♦ **Problems with self-esteem:** can happen because PTSD symptoms make it hard for a person to feel good about him or herself. Sometimes, because of things they did or didn't do at the time of trauma, survivors feel that they are bad, worthless, stupid, incompetent, evil, and so on.
- ♦ **Physical health symptoms and problems:** can happen because of long periods of physical agitation or arousal from anxiety. Trauma survivors may also avoid medical care because it reminds them of their trauma and causes anxiety, and this may lead to poorer health. Habits used to cope with post-traumatic stress, like alcohol use, can also cause health problems. Also, other things that happened at the time of trauma may cause health problems (for example, an injury).
- ♦ **Alcohol and/or drug abuse:** can happen when a person wants to avoid bad feelings that come with PTSD symptoms, or when other things that happened at the time of trauma lead a person to take drugs. This is a common way to cope with upsetting trauma symptoms, but it actually leads to more problems.

Remember:

Although PTSD symptoms and other trauma-related problems may take up most of a person's attention when they are suffering, people who have PTSD also have strengths, interests, commitments,

relationships with others, past experiences that were not traumatic, desires, and hopes for the future. Treatments are available for individuals with PTSD and associated trauma-related symptoms. Understanding the effects of trauma on relationships can also be an important step for family members or friends the effects of trauma.