

Tip Sheet: Understanding Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Traumatic events, such as military combat, assault, an accident or a natural disaster, can have long-lasting negative effects. Sometimes our biological responses and instincts, which can be lifesaving during a crisis, leave people with ongoing psychological symptoms because they are not integrated into consciousness.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affects 3.6% of the U.S. adult population — about 9 million Americans — with women are more likely to develop the condition than men. About 37% of those cases are classified as severe. While PTSD can occur at any age, the average age of onset is in a person's early 20s.

The symptoms of PTSD fall into the following categories:

- Intrusive Memories, which can include flashbacks of reliving the moment of trauma, bad dreams and scary thoughts.
- Avoidance, which can include staying away from certain places or objects that are reminders of the traumatic event. A person may also feel numb, guilty, worried or depressed or have trouble remembering the traumatic event.
- Dissociation, which can include out-of-body experiences or feeling that the world is "not real."
- Hypervigilance, which can include being startled very easily, feeling tense, trouble sleeping or outbursts of anger.

Symptoms of PTSD usually begin within 3 months after a traumatic event, but occasionally emerge years afterward. Symptoms must last more than a month to be considered PTSD. PTSD is often accompanied by depression, substance abuse or another anxiety disorder. Because young children have emerging abstract cognitive and limited verbal expression, research indicates that diagnostic criteria need to be more behaviorally anchored and developmentally sensitive to detect PTSD in preschool children.

PTSD is treated and managed in several ways:

- Medications, including mood stabilizers, antipsychotic medications and antidepressants
- Psychotherapy, such as cognitive behavioral therapy or group therapy
- Self-management strategies, such as "self-soothing"

Many therapy techniques, including mindfulness, are helpful to ground a person and bring them back to reality after a dissociative episode or a flashback. Service animals, especially dogs, can help soothe some of the symptoms of PTSD. Though PTSD cannot be cured, it can be treated effectively.

Source: National Alliance on Mental Illness