

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that is caused by experiencing a deeply disturbing event that is threatening to one's own or another's physical or emotional safety. PTSD as a diagnosis was developed in response to traumatic symptoms of war veterans and it was once thought that children could not develop PTSD; however, we now know that that assumption was wrong.

What To Look For:

PTSD greatly affects a child or teen's sense of physical and emotional safety and as a result they view their world with significant and persistent fear. Symptoms include:

- generalized fear and anxiety
- separation anxiety / clinginess to parents
- avoidance of aspects (sights, sounds, smells, places) related to the trauma
- sleep disturbance and nightmares
- repetitive play depicting aspects related to the trauma
- regression (i.e. the loss of a previously acquired skill such as toilet training)
- feeling constantly alert and being easily startled
- physical complaints
- irritability
- withdrawal
- aggression
- difficulty concentrating
- emotional numbness or not caring
- guilt (i.e. feeling responsible for the event)
- diminished interest in pleasurable activities

Possible Causes:

PTSD symptoms can occur as a result of either directly witnessing or being deeply personally impacted by a traumatic event such as:

- natural disasters such as floods
- man-made disasters such as plane crashes
- school shootings or even bullying
- automobile accidents
- physical abuse
- sexual abuse or rape
- neglect
- being exposed to domestic violence
- parental or peer death or suicide
- community violence
- being the victim of robbery or other assaults
- life threatening illnesses and associated medical treatments

Risk Factors:

Not everyone exposed to a traumatic event develops PTSD. In fact, even when exposed to the same event, some individuals will develop symptoms and others will not. Response to trauma are influenced by the following:

- severity of the trauma
- physical proximity to the trauma
- the number of experienced traumatic events
- individual attributes such as coping skills
- age: the younger the child, the more likely symptoms are to develop due to a lack of verbal skills and cognitive understanding
- gender: girls are affected at a higher rate

Treatment Options:

For a diagnosis of PTSD, symptoms must be present for more than one month after the event; however, that does not mean that treatment should wait. Of paramount importance is to seek immediate assistance. Although PTSD often has long-standing affects, it is treatable.

- Psychotropic Medication to decrease symptoms
- Individual Therapy to identify, express, and process feelings and to learn anxiety-reducing strategies thru talk, play, and art,
- Psycho-Education to create a supportive, understanding, and nurturing environment
- Family Psychotherapy to help additional family members that may themselves be experiencing symptoms
- Community Support or Group Therapy to process feelings with others who experienced the same or similar trauma
- School Services to minimize the negative affects of symptoms on academic progress

How You Can Help:

- Encourage your child or teen to label and express their feelings
- Support, understand, and praise your child without criticizing symptoms, particularly regressive behaviors
- As much as possible maintain structure and routines as before the incident
- Allow you child to make choices, even simple ones, to regain a sense of control
- Seek help for yourself or other family members that may also have been exposed to the trauma

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