



# POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that follows exposure to an extremely stressful event. Events that may lead to PTSD typically are life threatening and produce a sense of intense fear, helplessness or horror. A person who witnesses, experiences, or is threatened with serious injury or death may be vulnerable to developing symptoms of PTSD. Examples of such traumatic experiences are:

- Severe motor vehicle or machinery accidents
- Physical assaults or abuse
- Being forced into unwanted sexual activity
- Witnessing violence or sudden death
- The sudden destruction of one's home or community
- Hazardous work activities, such as fire fighting and rescue work
- Learning about sudden death or severe injury of a family member

## **SIGNS OF PTSD**

1. Reexperiencing the event(s) by:

- Distressing memories or dreams
- Feeling or behaving as if the event were recurring (a "flashback")
- Intense distress or physical reactions when reminded of the trauma

2. Avoidance or emotional numbing:

- Avoiding thinking about the traumatic events
- Avoiding activities that bring back memories of the trauma
- Feelings distant from others
- Trouble recalling parts of the events
- Feeling emotionally numb

3. Feeling very aroused or agitated:

- Trouble falling or staying asleep
- Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Trouble concentrating
- Feeling keyed up or on edge
- Feeling very jumpy or easily startled

Anxiety, fear, and arousal are common reactions to a life threatening situation and many people experience these reactions following traumatic events. In most people these reactions will diminish on their own. However, for some survivors of traumatic events, the symptoms may be delayed for months or years after the trauma.

A diagnosis of PTSD may be given when traumatic memories remain disturbing for a month or longer and persistently provoke fear, arousal, and avoidance behavior that is very distressing and/or greatly interferes with a person's life. In children the symptoms may be most apparent through changes in behavior. PTSD is often accompanied by feelings of depression, guilt, or shame and physical health complaints.

### **TREATMENT HELPS**

A variety of resources are available in the community to assist trauma survivors in reestablishing normalcy in their lives. In some cases, professional intervention may be helpful to reduce the symptoms of PTSD and depression and to help trauma survivors resume normal social and occupational functioning.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy for PTSD uses several therapy methods to help trauma survivors reduce fear and anxiety through "reprocessing" of traumatic memories. Reprocessing involves changing interpretations of the memories so they feel less threatening. Cognitive-behavioral therapy helps the individual learn to again feel safe and able to cope with life's stresses.

Although cognitive-behavioral therapy does not involve medications, some individuals benefit by initially using medications to control anxiety and later reducing medications as they improve their anxiety management skills.

**CALL 1-800-556-6249.**



**DARTMOUTH-HITCHCOCK PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATES**