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# Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

Human beings are incredibly resilient. However, some situations are so shocking and shattering that they can affect our minds, bodies and perceptions severely for a long time afterwards. When a traumatic event continues to influence our behaviour and have a negative impact on our lives for a long time after it occurs, this can be a sign of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, is one of several conditions known collectively as anxiety disorders: the most common type of mental disorder, affecting 12% of the population in any given year. We all feel anxious in certain situations, and anxiety can be helpful in motivating us and in improving our ability to deal with a crisis situation. For some people, however, anxiety can become so persistent and relentless that it interferes with their day-to-day functioning.

As its name suggests, post-traumatic stress disorder affects people who have gone through a traumatic event in their lives such as a disastrous earthquake, war, rape, a car or plane accident, or physical violence. Sometimes, seeing another person harmed or killed, or learning that a close friend or family member is in serious danger can cause the disorder. Richard, an ambulance emergency worker in BC, developed PTSD from the highly stressful work that he does. It was triggered when he was called to respond to a sudden death, which turned out to be a fireman that he knew.

## Types of Trauma

### Natural disaster, such as:

- hurricane
- earthquake

### Crime

- rape or physical assault
- burglary, mugging or hold-up

### War

- military combat
- war crimes
- torture
- being in a constant state of alert

### Major accident

- workplace
- automobile
- airplane

### Witnessing any of the above

Despite the seeming rarity of some of these events, PTSD will affect approximately 1 in 12 people at some point in their lives. Twice as many women as men develop the disorder, although the reasons for this are unclear. Moreover, post-traumatic stress disorder is higher among Canadian Forces personnel who go on more military deployments: as high as 5% in any given year.



A person who has PTSD is constantly reminded of their responses of horror, fear and helplessness to the traumatic event. These states continue to manifest themselves in the person in several ways.

For instance, the person may re-experience the event through recurrent nightmares, flashbacks and intrusive memories. This is the most characteristic symptom of PTSD, and often its most distressing. The anniversary of the triggering event, or situations which remind a person of it, can also cause extreme discomfort and anxiety. Increased arousal and anxiety in general is another common feature, where a person may become hypervigilant, sleeping less and being constantly on the alert. Some people with PTSD have difficulty concentrating and finishing tasks and can also become more aggressive.

Perhaps to protect a person from the emotional and physical intensity of some of the above symptoms, avoidance and emotional numbing are also characteristic of the disorder. The person may feel guilty, avoid talking or thinking about the trauma, withdraw from family and friends, and lose interest in activities they previously enjoyed. They may also begin to have difficulty feeling emotions, especially those associated with intimacy. In rare cases, a person may enter dissociative states, or a detached feeling of watching yourself go through something from the outside, particularly when believing they are re-living the episode.

PTSD can develop in both children and adults.

## Warning Signs of PTSD

While it is fairly common for some people to have an acute stress response to a traumatic event, only a small but significant proportion of people will go on to develop post-traumatic stress disorder. However, individuals who feel they are unable to regain control of their lives, or who experience the following symptoms for more than a month should consider seeking professional help.

### Symptoms to watch out for include:

- Recurring thoughts or nightmares about the event
- Changes in sleep patterns or appetite
- Anxiety and fear, especially when exposed to events or situations reminiscent of the trauma
- Feeling “on edge,” being easily startled or becoming overly alert
- Spontaneous crying, feelings of despair and hopelessness or other symptoms of depression
- Memory problems including difficulty in remembering aspects of the trauma
- Feeling scattered and unable to focus on work or daily activities
- Difficulty making decisions
- Irritability or agitation
- Anger or resentment
- Guilt
- Emotional numbness or withdrawal
- Sudden overprotectiveness and fear for the safety of loved ones
- Avoidance of activities, places or even people that remind you of the event

While the symptoms usually begin about three months after the traumatic event, on occasion they may surface years later. Moreover, it is common for depression, drug or alcohol dependence, or another anxiety disorder to co-occur with PTSD.

As more information on post-traumatic stress disorder has come to light in the last few years, prevention strategies have begun to be implemented. For instance, when a major traumatic event like a school shooting occurs, survivors are often given counselling afterwards so that they can deal with the event.

For those people who do develop symptoms beyond just an initial acute stress response, there are treatments that exist to help people recover from the impact of traumatic stress.

Group-based or one-on-one cognitive behavioural strategies are particularly successful because they address specific fears, thoughts and emotions lingering from the trauma. With time, treatments like these can help a person come to grips with the trauma, find closure and move beyond the event towards healing. Eventually, most people are able to reach a point where they feel comfortable in their own skin again and are able to remember without reliving.

## SOURCES

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