

Managing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

If you have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), you may be relieved that you now know why you have felt or behaved a certain way. Still, you may feel overwhelmed about the treatment ahead. You may also wonder how to get the support you need and how to deal with the condition day-to-day.

If you are living with PTSD, there are ways to help you recover from it and manage your symptoms.

How to manage lifestyle changes

Managing stress

Stress is your body's reaction to life changes and events, both good and bad. Stress can make PTSD worse. Take the following steps manage stress:



- Talk with your health care provider or a counselor if you would like to learn more about techniques to reduce your stress. He or she may suggest some stress reduction techniques such as:
 - Muscle relaxation exercises.
 - Regular exercise.
 - Meditation, yoga, or other mind–body exercises.
 - Breathing exercises.
 - Listening to quiet music.
 - Spending time outside.
- Maintain a healthy lifestyle. Eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep, and take time to relax.
- Spend time with others. Talk with them about how you are feeling and what kind of support you need. Try to not isolate yourself, even though you may feel like doing that. Isolating yourself can delay your recovery.
- Do activities and hobbies that you enjoy.
- Pace yourself when doing stressful things. Take breaks, and reward yourself when you finish. Make sure that you do not overload your schedule.

Medicines

Your health care provider may suggest certain medicines if he or she feels that they will help to improve your condition. Medicines for depression (*antidepressants*) or severe loss of contact with reality (*antipsychotics*) may be used to treat PTSD. Avoid using alcohol and other substances that may prevent your medicines from working properly. It is also important to:

- Talk with your pharmacist or health care provider about all medicines that you take, their possible side effects, and which medicines are safe to take together.
- Make it your goal to take part in all treatment decisions (*shared decision-making*). Ask about possible side effects of medicines that your health care provider recommends, and tell him or her how you feel about having those side effects. It is best if shared decision-making with your health care provider is part of your total treatment plan.

If your health care provider prescribes a medicine, you may not notice the full benefits of it for 4–8 weeks. Most people who are treated for PTSD need to take medicine for at least 6–12 months after they feel better. If you are taking medicines as part of your treatment, do not stop taking medicines before

you ask your health care provider if it is safe to stop. You may need to have the medicine slowly decreased (*tapered*) over time to lower the risk of harmful side effects.

Relationships

Many people who have PTSD have difficulty trusting others. Make an effort to:

- Take risks and develop trust with close friends and family members. Developing trust in others can help you feel safe and connect you with emotional support.
- Be open and honest about your feelings.
- Have fun and relax in safe spaces, such as with friends and family.
- Think about going to couples counseling, family education classes, or family therapy. Your loved ones may not always know how to be supportive. Therapy can be helpful for everyone.

How to recognize changes in your condition

Be aware of your symptoms and how often you have them. The following symptoms mean that you need to seek help for your PTSD:

- You feel suspicious and angry.
- You have repeated flashbacks.
- You avoid going out or being with others.
- You have an increasing number of fights with close friends or family members, such as your spouse.
- You have thoughts about hurting yourself or others.
- You cannot get relief from feelings of depression or anxiety.

Follow these instructions at home:

Lifestyle

- Exercise regularly. Try to do 30 or more minutes of physical activity on most days of the week.
- Try to get 7–9 hours of sleep each night. To help with sleep:
 - Keep your bedroom cool and dark.
 - Avoid screen time before bedtime. This means avoiding use of your TV, computer, tablet, and cell phone.
- Practice self-soothing skills and use them daily.
- Try to have fun and seek humor in your life.

Eating and drinking

- **Do not** eat a heavy meal during the hour before you go to bed.
- **Do not** drink alcohol or caffeinated drinks before bed.
- Avoid using alcohol or drugs.

General instructions

- If your PTSD is affecting your marriage or family, seek help from a family therapist.
- Take over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your health care provider.
- Make sure to let all of your health care providers know that you have PTSD. This is especially important if you are having surgery or need to be admitted to the hospital.
- Keep all follow-up visits as told by your health care providers. This is important.

Where to find support

Talking to others

- Explain that PTSD is a mental health problem. It is something that a person can develop after experiencing or seeing a life-threatening event. Tell them that PTSD makes you feel stress like you did during the event.
- Talk to your loved ones about the symptoms you have. Also tell them what things or situations can cause symptoms to start (are *triggers* for you).
- Assure your loved ones that there are treatments to help PTSD. Discuss possibly seeking family therapy or couples therapy.
- If you are worried or fearful about seeking treatment, ask for support.
- Keep daily contact with at least one trusted friend or family member.

Finances

Not all insurance plans cover mental health care, so it is important to check with your insurance carrier. If paying for co-pays or counseling services is a problem, search for a local or county mental health care center. Public mental health care services may be offered there at a low cost or no cost when you are not able to see a private health care provider. If you are a veteran, contact a local veterans organization or veterans hospital for more information.

If you are taking medicine for PTSD, you may be able to get the generic form, which may be less expensive than brand-name medicine. Some makers of prescription medicines also offer help to patients who cannot afford the medicines that they need.

Therapy and support groups

- Find a support group in your community. Often, groups are available for military veterans, trauma victims, and family members or caregivers.
- Look into volunteer opportunities. Taking part in these can help you feel more connected to your community.
- Contact a local organization to find out if you are eligible for a service dog.

Where to find more information

Go to this website to find more information about PTSD, treatment for PTSD, and how to get support:

- National Center for PTSD: www.ptsd.va.gov

Contact a health care provider if:

- Your symptoms get worse or they do not get better.

Get help right away if:

- You have thoughts about hurting yourself or others.

If you ever feel like you may hurt yourself or others, or have thoughts about taking your own life, get help right away. You can go to your nearest emergency department or call:

- **Your local emergency services (911 in the U.S.).**
- **A suicide crisis helpline, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. This is open 24-hours a day.**

Summary

- If you are living with PTSD, there are ways to help you recover from it and manage your symptoms.
- Find supportive environments and people who understand PTSD. Spend time in those places, and maintain contact with those people.
- Work with your health care team to create a plan for managing PTSD. The plan should include counseling, stress reduction techniques, and healthy lifestyle habits.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

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