

Supporting Someone With Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health disorder that can develop after a traumatic event, such as a threat to life, a serious injury, sexual violence, or any type of abuse. When a person has PTSD, his or her condition can affect others around him or her, such as friends and family members. Friends and family can help by offering support and understanding.

What do I need to know about this condition?

Experiencing a traumatic event can cause some people to develop PTSD. Sometimes, PTSD can occur in people who hear about trauma that happens to a close family member or friend. PTSD can be present for anyone at any age.

PTSD symptoms may start soon after a frightening event, or months or years later. Symptoms last at least one month, and they tend to disrupt relationships, work or school, and daily activities. Symptoms may include:

- Re-experiencing the traumatic event through:
 - Dreams.
 - Feelings of fear, terror, sadness, or anger.
 - Unwanted memories.
 - Physical symptoms, such as rapid heartbeat, shallow breathing, sweating, or shaking.
 - Flashbacks, or feeling like the past event is happening in the present.
- Avoidance of reminders of the event. This may involve:
 - Decreased interest or participation in daily activities.
 - Avoidance of people or loss of connection with them.
- Being very sensitive or having reactions to surroundings. The person with PTSD may:
 - Be easily startled.
 - Engage in self-destructive behavior.
 - Be irritable.
 - Be highly stressed or feel "on edge."
 - Have outbursts toward others.
 - Have trouble concentrating or sleeping.
- Negative moods and thoughts. These may involve:
 - Negative thoughts about self and others.
 - Stressful and negative feelings without a clear cause.
 - Inability to remember parts of the event.
 - Blaming oneself or others.
 - Trouble experiencing positive feelings or events.

What do I need to know about the treatment options?

Treatment for PTSD may include a combination of:

- Medicines to reduce certain symptoms.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) with a mental health professional who is experienced in treating PTSD. This type of therapy teaches a person how to recognize unhealthy feelings, thoughts, and behaviors, and how to replace those feelings with positive thoughts and actions.

- Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR). This type of therapy involves moving the eyes from side to side or alternating tapping the left and right sides of the body (knees, feet, shoulders). These activities combined with positive imagery can help to lower sensitivity to the traumatic event.

If your loved one has other mental health problems, such as depression, alcohol abuse, or drug addiction, his or her treatment plan will include treatment for those conditions.

How can I support my loved one?

Talk about the condition

- Tell your loved one that you want to hear how he or she is feeling, but give your loved one space if he or she does not feel like talking.
- Keep conversations positive.
- Listen well. Ask questions if you do not understand. Know that it is okay for your loved one to talk about the traumatic event, and that you do not have to "fix" things.

Find support and resources

- Ask your loved one's health care provider to recommend therapists or support groups that specialize in PTSD.
- Attend family therapy. Working with a family counselor can help to reduce family tension and stress, and that can help with your loved one's PTSD symptoms.
- If your loved one is a veteran, look for information from a local veterans organization. Consider calling the National Caregiver Support Line to get support and resources from a social worker: 1-855-260-3274
- Think about joining self-help and support groups, not only for your friend or family member, but also for yourself. People in these peer and family support groups understand what you and your loved one are going through. They can help you feel a sense of comfort and connect you with local resources to help you learn more.



General support

- Make an effort to learn all you can about PTSD.
- Help your loved one follow his or her treatment plan as directed by health care providers. This could mean driving him or her to therapy sessions or suggesting ways to cope with stress.
- Ask your loved one how you can best help him or her.
- Offer to go with your loved one to health care visits. You can help your loved one to stay on track with medicine and therapy.
- Plan a walk or other exercises with your loved one. Doing these activities can help your loved one stay healthy and give him or her a chance to talk with you.
- Encourage your loved one to build up a support system by staying in touch with close friends and family. Plan activities like having dinner or seeing a movie together.
- Try not to take your loved one's feelings or actions personally.

How can I create a safe environment?

Personal safety

- Encourage your loved one not to drink alcohol. Alcohol can make PTSD symptoms worse and can prevent treatment from working. If you need help with this, talk to your loved one's health care provider.
- Make sure your loved one has a good relationship with his or her mental health provider. Mental health treatment can help to lower the risk of self-harm or suicide.
- If your loved one's PTSD causes violent behavior, talk about ways to handle angry situations. Think about setting up a "time-out" system that allows anyone to stop a discussion and step away to calm down.
- If your loved one is often angry or violent, talk with his or her health care provider about these symptoms. Your loved one's health care provider may recommend different therapy or ways to reduce this behavior.

Home safety

- Think about putting a security system in your loved one's home. This may help your loved one feel safer and reduce his or her symptoms.
- Support your loved one to create a safe and healthy home setting.
- If your loved one becomes angry or violent, go to a safe place and call for help. If there are children in the home, get them to a safe place as well.

How should I care for myself?

Supporting someone with PTSD can cause stress. It is important to find ways to care for your body, mind, and well-being.

- Eat a healthy diet, stay hydrated, and get regular exercise.
- Be patient. The process of PTSD treatment can be slow. Remember that you cannot change your loved one yourself. It is up to him or her.
- Stay positive. Helping a loved one with PTSD can be stressful, but try to remember fun times and celebrate small victories.
- Make time for activities and hobbies that you enjoy, as well as time for yourself. This will help you to reduce stress and gather your thoughts.
- Ask for support from family members, friends, coworkers, neighbors, support groups, or a health care provider.



What are some signs that the condition is getting worse?

If your loved one's symptoms are more intense or more frequent, the PTSD may be getting worse. If treatment does not seem to be helping symptoms, talk to your loved one's health care provider about a new treatment approach or added PTSD resources.

Get help right away if:

- Your loved one expresses thoughts about harming himself or herself or others.
- You are in a situation that threatens your life. Leave the situation and call emergency services (911 in the U.S.) as soon as possible.

- Your loved one is:
 - Acting suspicious and angry.
 - Having repeated flashbacks.
- You and your loved one are having an increasing number of fights.
- Your loved one expresses that he or she is very depressed or anxious.

If you ever feel like your loved one may hurt himself or herself or others, or may have thoughts about taking his or her 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

- PTSD is a mental health disorder that can develop after a traumatic event, such as a threat to life, a serious injury, sexual violence, or abuse of any type.
- Treatment for PTSD may include medicines, counseling (*cognitive behavioral therapy*), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR), or a combination of these approaches.
- Talk with your loved one about PTSD and its symptoms, and seek information from health care providers or support groups.
- Make sure your loved one has a good relationship with his or her mental health provider. Mental health treatment can help to reduce your loved one's risk of self-harm or suicide.
- It is important to take care of yourself so you can give your loved one the best care. **Do not** wait to take care of yourself if you feel threatened by your loved one. Get away and get help.

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.