

# H O P E



FOR  
RECOVERY

UNDERSTANDING  
POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

We live in a society that values and teaches the importance of self-reliance, inner strength, the ability to overcome adversity.

In fact, it is common to feel that no matter what we've faced, no matter how extreme the ordeal, we should be able to get over it and eventually move on to better, happier, greater things.

But what if, after something terrible has happened, you find that you simply cannot

*“move on?”*

## What Is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?

*“I was 18 years old when*

*I was raped at knifepoint. At first I felt devastated, but after a while I believed I was putting it behind me. That's what I wanted to do, and thought I should be able to do. But the truth is that I don't recognize my life anymore. Nothing has been the same since. I wake up at night thinking he's there in my room. And I can barely breathe. I still can hear his voice...”*



Many of us have had a traumatic experience — the death of a loved one, serious illness, divorce. At the time, we may have been very upset, or frightened, or sad. But usually the grief passes, the pain lessens over time, and life eventually becomes more normal.

But sometimes people experience life-threatening or life-changing situations that are so distressing or cruel that the memory doesn't fade, not even slightly. For some people, the experience is so extreme that they find they cannot get passed it to move on with life.

Someone who feels this way may be suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, a very real and debilitating health condition. Fortunately, a lot has been learned in the last several years about PTSD treatment and support.

Understanding PTSD and seeking intervention is important to treating the persistent and overwhelming symptoms, and helping people to regain their lives.



*“I wasn’t there for anyone anymore — it was like I had checked out, emotionally. I went through the motions every day, but didn’t really feel anything or want to be around anyone. I couldn’t focus. Hours would pass with nothing done. And I know my family saw it, I know they felt the void. I think this hurt everyone around me, which made me feel even worse. I knew something was very, very wrong with me, I just didn’t know what. And I didn’t know what to do about it.”*

## WHAT CAUSES PTSD?

A person develops PTSD in response to an extreme trauma — a terrifying event or ordeal that a person has experienced, witnessed, or learned about, especially one that is life-threatening or causes physical harm. The experience causes that person to feel intense fear, horror or a sense of helplessness.

### THOSE AT RISK:

Anyone who has been victimized or has witnessed a violent act, or who has been repeatedly exposed to life-threatening situations. This includes survivors of:

- Domestic or intimate partner violence
- Rape or sexual assault
- Physical assault such as mugging or car-jacking
- Random violent acts such as those that take place in public, in schools or in the workplace

Survivors of unexpected events in daily life:

- Car accidents or fires
- Natural disasters, such as tornadoes or earthquakes
- Major catastrophic events, such as a plane crash or terrorist act
- Disasters caused by human error, such as industrial accidents

Combat veterans or civilian victims of war

Children who are neglected or sexually, physically or verbally abused, or adults who were abused as children

People who learn of the sudden unexpected death of a family member or close friend

Those diagnosed with a life-threatening illness or who have undergone invasive medical procedures

Professionals who respond to victims in trauma situations, such as emergency medical service workers, police, firefighters, military, and search and rescue workers

It is important to know that not everyone who experiences a traumatic event will develop PTSD. But many people do. It is estimated that almost 70 percent of adults in this country have experienced a traumatic event at least once in their lives and that up to 20 percent of these people go on to develop PTSD. An estimated five percent of Americans — more than 13 million people — have PTSD at any given time.

Anybody can develop PTSD — men, women and children, young and old alike.

Victims of trauma related to physical and sexual assault face the greatest risk of developing PTSD. Women are about twice as likely to develop PTSD as men. This may be due to the fact that women are more likely to experience interpersonal violence, such as rape or physical or sexual abuse, especially in childhood. Women also experience repeated trauma, as in the case of domestic violence.

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF PTSD?

PTSD is a complex disorder that can affect many aspects of a person’s life, particularly day-to-day functioning, quality of life and relationships.

Some of the symptoms of PTSD are very dramatic, such as sudden memories that can make a person feel like the event is happening again, right then. Other symptoms, like feeling emotionally numb or detached from loved ones, are subtle, but can be devastating to someone suffering from PTSD and to those who care about that person.

<b>THREE SYMPTOM “CLUSTERS” ARE ASSOCIATED WITH PTSD:</b>
<b>Re-living the event</b> through recurring nightmares or other intrusive images that “pop” into one’s head at any time. People who suffer from PTSD also have extreme emotional or physical reactions, such as uncontrollable shaking, chills, heart palpitations or panic when faced with reminders of the event.
<b>Avoiding reminders of the event</b> including places, people, thoughts or other activities associated with the trauma. PTSD sufferers feel emotionally empty, withdrawing from friends and family, and losing interest in everyday activities.
<b>Being on guard or hyper-aroused</b> including irritability or sudden anger, difficulty sleeping, lack of concentration, being overly alert or easily startled.

People with PTSD may have low self-esteem or relationship problems, or may seem disconnected from their loved ones. In addition, other problems may develop that can mask or intensify PTSD symptoms including:

- Psychological problems including depression, or another anxiety disorder such as panic disorder.
- Physical complaints such as chronic pain, fatigue, stomach pains, breathing problems, headaches, muscle cramps or aches, lower back pain or heart problems.
- Self-destructive behavior including alcohol or drug abuse, as well as suicidal tendencies.



## HOW IS PTSD DIAGNOSED?

A diagnosis of PTSD may be considered if a certain number of symptoms from each of the “clusters” have lasted for one month or more, and if they cause severe problems or distress at home or at work, or in general affect daily life.

PTSD symptoms usually appear within several weeks of the trauma, but some people don’t experience symptoms until months, even years, later.

PTSD can last six months for some people, while others may experience symptoms for much longer. Again, it is important to understand that people respond differently to trauma. Some people will have a few problems, and these problems may go away without treatment. Others will need support and some kind of treatment before they can move forward with their lives.

## HOW IS PTSD TREATED?

*“When I lost my son in a car accident, I felt my life was over. I didn’t want to do anything or see anyone, nothing made me happy or sad. I couldn’t stop myself from thinking about the accident and couldn’t sleep through the night. I hated feeling this way, but my son was gone, nothing could change that or the way I feel.”*

The most critical steps in treating PTSD are often the most difficult — recognizing the problem and getting help. There are many reasons why this can be hard to do.

- People who have experienced an extreme traumatic event may hope, or even expect, to be able to “handle it” and “get over it” on their own.
- Sometimes people feel guilty about what happened and may mistakenly believe they are to blame or deserve the hurt and pain. Sometimes, the experience may be too personal, painful or embarrassing to discuss.
- Some people avoid dealing with anything related to the trauma, especially as they try to get back to the “normal” activities of their daily lives.
- PTSD can make a person feel isolated or alone, making it difficult to reach out for help.
- People with PTSD don’t always make the connection between the traumatic event and the emotional emptiness, anger, anxiety, and sometimes physical symptoms they unexpectedly find themselves feeling months, even years, after the trauma.
- Sometimes people don’t know that help is available, or don’t know where to turn for help.

If you or someone you care about has PTSD, you need to know that help is available. **PTSD is treatable.**

## TREATMENT OPTIONS

If you suspect that you or someone you care about has PTSD it is important to talk with a trusted, knowledgeable healthcare provider. A psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker or other qualified healthcare professional who provides counseling related to trauma can help you determine if you have PTSD and help you get the treatment and support you need to recover.

A primary care provider, such as a family practitioner or obstetrician-gynecologist, can diagnose PTSD and help you determine the best treatment approach.

If diagnosed, there are a number of effective treatment options for PTSD. Treatment can involve psychotherapy, medication, or a combination of both.

Discuss these options with your healthcare provider to determine what is best for you.

**PSYCHOTHERAPY** Psychotherapeutic or counseling methods, such as cognitive behavior therapy including exposure and anxiety management treatments, are effective in treating PTSD.

**MEDICATION** Prescription medication is effective in treating PTSD. Medication should always be taken as directed. Any changes with your treatment regimen should be discussed first with your healthcare provider.

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND ABUSE** are major risk factors for PTSD. For PTSD sufferers who currently are involved in abusive relationships or continually exposed to domestic violence, being safe and staying safe is the first priority.

*“I know what he went through was horrible, I cannot even imagine. I want to help him, I’ve tried to help him, because I love him. But it keeps going on, he won’t let it go, he just drifts farther away. He’s edgy and uptight and he can’t sleep. And he’s drinking more and more, I’m sure, to take the edge off... I don’t understand why he won’t talk to me, let me help, and it hurts a great deal. I feel like I’ve failed him. He’s not a part of our life anymore — and he’s shut me out of his. I have never felt more alone, or more helpless.”*



## HOW CAN FAMILY AND FRIENDS HELP?



It can be very difficult to watch a loved one or good friend deal with the after effects of a trauma. Not only do you worry, but your offers of help may be rejected. The person may seem distant or emotionally numb, or may be struggling with other symptoms that are characteristic of PTSD.

But try not to become discouraged. This person needs you now more than ever. Here are some things you can do:

- **Encourage the person to seek and continue treatment.** This can be hard because treatment means confronting the trauma and all of the upsetting and frightening emotions and memories connected to it. It can take time to work through it. But your encouragement and support during treatment will help a great deal. Your involvement and understanding can help your loved one seek and continue treatment.
- **Provide emotional support and listen.** Encourage the person to share his or her feelings. Be a good listener, this is part of the healing process.
- **Be patient and have realistic expectations for recovery.** The healing process can take some time. Depending on the severity of the situation, recovery might take several months or possibly longer for a person suffering from PTSD. Understanding this will help you stay optimistic and supportive when it is needed most.
- **Take care of yourself.** Being there for someone who is recovering from a traumatic experience can be stressful at times. Take time to take care of yourself. Learn how to be supportive without taking on the role of a therapist.

# REACHING OUT

It is easy to feel alone when you or someone you care about is suffering from PTSD. But you are not alone. There is a lot of information available about PTSD and there are dedicated people affiliated with a number of organizations who can help with your questions and offer a variety of support services.

## THE PTSD ALLIANCE

The PTSD Alliance is a group of professional and advocacy organizations that have joined forces to increase awareness and promote a better understanding of posttraumatic stress disorder.

The PTSD Alliance provides educational materials through the PTSD Alliance Resource Center for medical and healthcare professionals, individuals diagnosed with PTSD and their loved ones, and the general public to educate them about the prevalence, diagnosis and treatment of this common and serious health condition.

THE PTSD ALLIANCE IS SUPPORTED BY AN  
UNRESTRICTED EDUCATIONAL GRANT FROM PFIZER INC

## PTSD ALLIANCE RESOURCE CENTER

The PTSD Alliance Resource Center offers:

- A variety of brochures, books and educational information for the general public on PTSD.
- Support programs for those with PTSD and their families.
- Screening tools, continuing education programs, books and other published literature for medical and healthcare professionals.

For a list of materials available through the  
PTSD Alliance Resource Center,  
call toll-free 1-877-507-PTSD  
or visit the PTSD Alliance at  
[www.PTSDAlliance.org](http://www.PTSDAlliance.org)

## PTSD ALLIANCE MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS



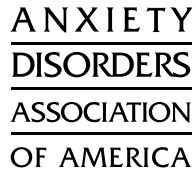
The PTSD Alliance includes four national organizations representing a spectrum of healthcare issues related to PTSD including trauma-related stress, anxiety disorders and women's healthcare.

Alliance member organizations include:



*A national medical organization representing more than 40,000 physicians who provide healthcare for women*

**The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG)**  
409 12th Street, SW, PO Box 96920, Washington, DC 20090-6920  
202/638-5577  
[www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org)



*A national, non-profit partnership of researchers, clinicians and consumers dedicated to promoting the prevention and cure of anxiety disorders and improving the lives of all people who suffer from them.*

**The Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA)**  
11900 Parklawn Drive, Suite 100, Rockville, MD 20852  
301/231-9350  
[www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)



*An international organization representing psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, nurses, counselors, researchers, administrators, advocates and others with an interest in the study and treatment of traumatic stress.*

**The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS)**  
60 Revere Drive, Suite 500, Northbrook, IL 60062  
847/480-9028  
[www.istss.org](http://www.istss.org)



*A national, non-profit organization devoted to education, advocacy and research related to the early recognition and treatment of traumatic stress and trauma-generated disorders.*

**The Sidran Traumatic Stress Foundation**  
200 E. Joppa Road, Suite 207, Towson, MD 21286  
410/825-8888  
[www.sidran.org](http://www.sidran.org)

# MYTHS AND FACTS ABOUT PTSD

**MYTH: *PTSD ONLY AFFECTS WAR VETERANS.***

**FACT:** Although PTSD does affect war veterans, PTSD can affect anyone. Almost 70 percent of Americans will be exposed to a traumatic event in their lifetime. Of those people, up to 20 percent may go on to develop PTSD.

PTSD may develop in a person who has experienced, witnessed or learned about a traumatic event that was life-threatening or caused physical harm. Those most at risk of developing PTSD include victims of interpersonal violence including rape, severe beatings, and sexual assault. Victims of domestic violence and childhood abuse are at risk for PTSD.

**MYTH: *PEOPLE SHOULD BE ABLE TO MOVE ON WITH THEIR LIVES AFTER A TRAUMATIC EVENT AND THOSE WHO CANNOT COPE ARE WEAK.***

**FACT:** Developing PTSD is not a sign of a character flaw. Many people who experience a traumatic event go through an adjustment period. Most of these people are able to return to leading a normal life. However, the stress caused by trauma can affect all aspects of a person's life including mental, emotional and physical well-being. Research shows that prolonged trauma disrupts and alters brain chemistry. For some people, a traumatic event changes their views about themselves and the world around them. This may lead to the development of PTSD.

**MYTH: *PEOPLE SUFFER FROM PTSD RIGHT AFTER THEY EXPERIENCE A TRAUMATIC EVENT.***

**FACT:** PTSD symptoms usually develop within several weeks of the trauma, but may not appear for several months or even years. Symptoms may continue for years following the trauma, or, in some cases, they may subside and reoccur later in life, which is often the case with victims of childhood abuse. Some people don't recognize that they have PTSD because they may not associate their current symptoms with past trauma. In domestic violence situations, victims may not realize that their prolonged, continual exposure to abuse puts them at risk.



PTSD

A L L I A N C E

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

1-877-507-PTSD

[www.PTSDAlliance.org](http://www.PTSDAlliance.org)

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