

WHAT IS POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)?

PTSD is a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary, or dangerous event.

It is natural to feel afraid during and after a traumatic situation. Fear triggers many split-second changes in the body to help defend against danger or to avoid it. This “fight-or-flight” response is a typical reaction meant to protect a person from harm. Nearly everyone will experience a range of reactions after trauma, yet most people recover from initial symptoms naturally. Those who continue to experience problems may be diagnosed with PTSD. People who have PTSD may feel stressed or frightened even when they are not in danger.¹

Trauma is more common than we think but the term is often misunderstood. “Trauma happens when an intense experience stuns a child-like a bolt out of the blue; it overwhelms the child, leaving him altered and disconnected from their body, mind and spirit. Any coping mechanisms the child may have had are undermined, and he or she feels utterly helpless. Trauma can also be the result of ongoing fear and nervous tension.”²

No two people experience an event or situation the exact same way, so their internal reactions are as unique as they are.

As a result, an event that causes trauma for one person may not necessarily cause trauma for another.

As parents we may also have experienced trauma or we may feel triggered by the long term stressors in our lives.

A trigger sets forth a chain reaction. Sometimes a trigger is easily identifiable and sometimes it is not. When triggered, a person may:

- experience a surge of adrenaline that may look like he or she is acting out or having a wave of uncontrollable emotions
- be visibly shut down
- be uncharacteristically quiet

A traumatic event can include:

- a severe fall
- a broken bone
- something as simple as a scary movie,
- a negative interaction at school you may or may not know about
- an event that could have caused them or someone else to be killed or badly hurt

Extreme events include:

- sexual abuse
- physical or mental abuse
- witnessing a violent crime
- disasters such as floods, school shootings, car crashes, or fires
- a friend’s suicide

1 in 5

children in the U.S. has a diagnosable mental health condition, yet less than 20 percent of those youth receive the treatment they need.

1. National Institute of Health
2. *Trauma-Proofing Your Kids*, Peter Levine and Maggie Kline
3. U.S. Department of Health & Human Services

By directly educating families and communities about youth mental health, and indirectly helping to reduce the blame, shame, silence, and misunderstanding that surrounds it, the Youth Mental Health Project helps to increase prevention and early intervention that can reduce the incidence and severity of youth mental health conditions.

SYMPTOMS

All children may experience very stressful events that affect how they think and feel. However, sometimes children who experience severe or repeated stress, such as from an injury, from the death or threatened death of a close family member or friend, or from violence, will be affected long-term. The child could experience this trauma directly or could witness it happening to someone else. When children develop long term symptoms (longer than one month) from such stress, which are upsetting or interfere with their relationships and activities, they may be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).⁴

Children and teens can have extreme reactions to trauma, but their symptoms may not be the same as adults. They may develop disruptive, disrespectful, or destructive behaviors. They may feel guilty for not preventing injury or deaths. They may also have thoughts of revenge.⁵

PTSD symptoms include:

- Reliving the event over and over in thought or in play
- Nightmares and sleep problems
- Becoming very upset when something causes memories of the event
- Lack of positive emotions
- Intense ongoing fear or sadness
- Irritability and angry outbursts
- Constantly looking for possible threats, being easily startled
- Acting helpless, hopeless or withdrawn
- Denying that the event happened or feeling numb
- Avoiding places or people associated with the event

Because children who have experienced traumatic stress may seem restless, fidgety, or have trouble paying attention and staying organized, the symptoms of traumatic stress can be confused with symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).⁶

TIPS FOR PARENTS

- Know that extra support is appropriate and available
- If something scary just happened make sure you take a breath and are calm as well
- Do not think “just getting over it” is always possible
- Even if your child doesn’t want to talk, keep reminding him you are there for him
- Support wellness behaviors like healthy diet, exercise and routine sleep
- Know the warning signs

Early intervention can help children/adolescents develop important coping and adaptive skills (e.g., resilience), allowing them to thrive socially, emotionally, academically, and physically.

For more information:
The Youth Mental Health Project
ymhproject.org
National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov
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4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

5. National Institute of Health

6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention