

WHAT IS POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)?

Children under six

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

Early intervention can help children/adolescents develop important coping and adaptive skills (e.g., resilience), allowing them to thrive socially, emotionally, academically, and physically. With proper treatment and support, people with mental illness can lead productive and fulfilling lives.

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

Young children can have extreme reactions to trauma. They may develop disruptive, disrespectful, or destructive behaviors.

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/outbursts
- Intense ongoing fear or sadness
- Acting helpless, hopeless or withdrawn
- Denying that the event happened or feeling numb
- Wanting to avoid places they once loved

In children (under 6 years of age), these symptoms can also include:

- Wetting the bed after having learned to use the toilet
- Forgetting how to or being unable to talk
- Acting out the scary event during playtime
- Being unusually clingy with a parent or other adult

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 of⁵ attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

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
- Young children may not be able to verbalize how they “feel” emotionally but they may be able to talk about their physical sensations - heart rate, lump in throat, sweat, tight muscles
- Help them to identify and validate their body’s sensations
- Do not think “just getting over it” is always possible
- Encourage rest and slow life down for a while
- Support wellness behaviors like healthy diet, exercise and routine sleep

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. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention