

# 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. There is a "fight-or-flight" response that will typically happen to protect a person from harm. Nearly everyone will experience a range of reactions after trauma, and most will recover from initial symptoms naturally. Those who continue to experience problems may be diagnosed with PTSD. People with PTSD may feel stressed or frightened, even when not in a dangerous situation.<sup>1</sup>

**T**rauma is more common than we think, but the term is often misunderstood. "Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include: unpredictable emotions,

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

flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea."<sup>2</sup>

**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 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

**1 in 5**

children has a diagnosable mental health condition, but nearly two-thirds of this population get little or no help. Untreated mental health problems can cause a lot of problems, like disrupting children's functioning at home, school, and within their community.<sup>3</sup>

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

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
- uncharacteristically quiet
- disassociate

1. National Institute of Mental Health  
2. American Psychological Association  
3. Mental Health America

In one nationally representative sample of young children ages 12 to 17, 8% reported a lifetime prevalence of sexual assault, 17% reported physical assault, and 39% reported witnessing violence. Many also reported experiencing multiple and repeated traumatic events. This is why it is important to learn how trauma affects children, the more a family member or parent knows the more they will understand the reasons for certain behaviors and emotions and be better prepared to help children and teens cope. <sup>4</sup>

## 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).<sup>6</sup>

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.

### PTSD symptoms include:<sup>5+6</sup>

- Trouble sleeping
- Nightmares about the event
- Feeling numb or separate from other people
- Getting annoyed quickly
- Trouble focusing
- Headaches
- Stomachaches
- Acting out the traumatic event during playtime
- Avoiding places or people associated with the event
- Acting helpless, hopeless, or withdrawn
- Lack of positive emotions
- Easily startled

Not all children experience traumatic stress after encountering a traumatic event, but those who do can recover.

As a family member or other caring adult, you can help support children and help them adapt and overcome these experiences. <sup>4</sup>

## TIPS FOR PARENTS

- Assure the child that they are safe, and talk about what is being done to ensure that they will stay safe at home or at school
- Explain to them that they are not responsible for what happened
- Be patient with them. There is no set time for healing. Some children might recover quicker than others, and some slower. Just remember to be supportive and reassure them that they do not need to feel guilty about anything.

It is still unknown why some children develop PTSD after experiencing stressful and traumatic events, and why others do not. There are many factors that can play a role, including, biology and temperament. However, preventing risks for trauma, like maltreatment, violence, or injuries or lessening the impact of unavoidable disasters on children can help protect a child from PTSD. <sup>6</sup>

### For more information:

The Youth Mental Health Project  
[ymhproject.org](http://ymhproject.org)

National Institute of Mental Health  
[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

### Special thank you to:

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4. SAMHSA

5. Child Mind Institute

6. CDC