

# What Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

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Post-traumatic stress disorder, often called PTSD, is a condition that sometimes occurs after an individual has gone through an intense and disastrous experience. PTSD is actually a group of symptoms that may develop in the aftermath of a natural disaster such as a tornado, or a man-made disaster such as the Oklahoma City bombing or the attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center. Symptoms may show up right away, but often they do not appear until weeks or months after the event. Having these symptoms does not mean that a person is mentally ill--it simply means that he or she is having a normal response to an overwhelmingly tragic situation.

### A Sense of Loss

People traumatized by a disaster speak of feeling a vast sense of loss. They often feel they have lost their safety, their hope for the future, and a sense of control over their own lives.

They may hesitate to trust in others and sense that their own identity and personal power have been diminished. Those involved directly in the tragic event may have lost friends or family members, or their home, workplace, or belongings.

### How PTSD Can Make Us Feel

The stress associated with loss may be expressed in the way a person feels:

- headaches
- body aches and pains
- vomiting
- bowel problems
- skin disorders
- fatigue



### It Can Also Affect Our Emotions And The Way We Think And Behave:

- memory loss
- difficulty concentrating
- emotional outbursts or unusual reactions
- overeating or loss of appetite
- loss of interest in favorite activities
- decreased work performance
- irritability or anger
- confusion
- fearfulness
- guilt
- sleeplessness or excessive sleeping
- nightmares
- sadness
- depression
- difficulty relating to others
- recurring memories or "flashbacks"

Such symptoms are understandable for someone experiencing traumatic stress and should be viewed as temporary problems that will gradually ease.

*(continued)*

## Help Yourself Feel Better

You have the power to reduce the symptoms of PTSD and to speed your own recovery. Although your life will never be exactly as it was before the tragedy, in time it can again be happy and rewarding.

- Talk openly with friends and loved ones about your feelings--even those very painful feelings of fear, anxiety, and guilt.
- Get involved in some kind of regular physical activity, such as walking, gardening, or swimming, and make time for other kinds of recreation.
- Even though you may be having trouble sleeping, try to keep your sleep schedule as normal as possible.
- Eat well-balanced and regular meals. Resist the temptation to eat a lot of high-fat or sugary foods, to overdo caffeine, or to skip meals.
- Refrain from using alcohol or drugs to numb your feelings. This tactic just delays the healing process and may result in the development of an addiction.
- Allow yourself relief from other pressures. Try to delay big, life-changing decisions until a less stressful time.
- To the degree possible, return to normal daily routines . . . . .



. . . . . **Much has changed,  
but you are still in control  
of your life!**

## Help Someone Else

If you are seeing signs of PTSD in a friend or family member, it's important to know some ways to help.

- Let your friend know you are sorry about what happened and you want to understand and help.
- Listen carefully, patiently, and often. Be open to different points of view and don't insist that yours be heard. Remember that everyone responds differently to trauma. There's no "right" way, nor is there an official timetable for healing. Each person recovers at his own pace.
- Don't take it personally if your friend expresses anger or criticism.
- Respect the need for privacy. Don't repeat what you hear, and don't press your friend if he doesn't always feel like talking.
- Offer an appropriate form of help, but don't try to do everything for your friend. A person with symptoms of PTSD needs to regain control of his life, not lose independence.

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