

Clinical Corner – What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

Post-traumatic stress disorder, which is commonly referred to as PTSD, is a condition which some people develop after they experience a very traumatic or life threatening event. For instance, a person might develop PTSD after observing another person being seriously injured or killed. Natural disasters and wars are likely to cause some of its victims to experience post-traumatic stress disorder. Childhood traumas and workplace traumas can cause PTSD. Car accidents, being robbed, and being raped are frequent causes of PTSD.

How Soon Does Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Develop?

In some people PTSD develops immediately after they experience the unusually traumatic event. However, in other people, signs of the disorder do not develop until several weeks, months, or even years after the event.

What Characteristics Are Associated With Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

PTSD develops when a person witnesses or experiences a traumatic event and later experiences some of the following for a prolonged period of time:

- Relives the traumatic event by thinking or dreaming about it frequently
- Is unsettled or distressed to the point of impairment in other areas of his/her life such as in school, at work, or in personal relationships
- Avoids any situation that might cause him/her to relive the trauma
- Demonstrates a certain amount of generalized emotional numbness
- Shows a heightened sense of being on guard (is easily "freaked")

PTSD victims often have such additional emotional manifestations as a sense of hopelessness, a sense of fear, insomnia, irritability, and/or difficulty in concentrating.

Children with PTSD may show unexplained emotional distress, or they might complain of pain.

Examples of traumatic events known to lead to PTSD include:

- Military combat
- Violent criminal attacks
- Sexual assaults
- Serious accidents
- Life threatening natural disasters

At What Age Does Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Appear?

PTSD can occur at any age.

How Often Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Seen In Our Society?

PTSD is very common in the United States. Some studies report that more than ten percent (10%) of the population will suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder at some point in their lives.

How Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Diagnosed?

In adults, PTSD is usually diagnosed when they seek professional help because they are suffering, and their emotional state is having a negative impact on their schoolwork, on their job, or in their social relationships. Children may be brought in for evaluation because of unexpected behavior changes or unexplained physical problems.

How Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Treated?

Individual or group therapy, in addition to some medications, may be used in the treatment of PTSD. Therapy helps those with post-traumatic stress disorder work through the traumatic event that caused the condition. With the help of the therapist, the person with PTSD can gently examine and review the traumatic events of the past and learn to conquer his/her feelings of anxiety. E.M.D.R. (Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing) is a very effective treatment for PTSD. Certain antidepressant medications and mild tranquilizers are sometimes prescribed to help lessen some of the painful symptoms associated with PTSD.

What Happens To Someone With Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

The course of PTSD is quite variable. With adequate treatment, about one-third of the people with PTSD will recover within a few weeks. Some of these people have no further problems. Many people take longer, sometimes a year or more, to recover from PTSD. Despite treatment, other people continue to have mild to moderate symptoms for a more prolonged period of time.

What Can People Do If They Need Help?

The first step is to obtain a thorough history and diagnostic assessment.