

What Is PTSD?

PTSD

Posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, can occur after someone goes through, sees, or learns about a traumatic event like:

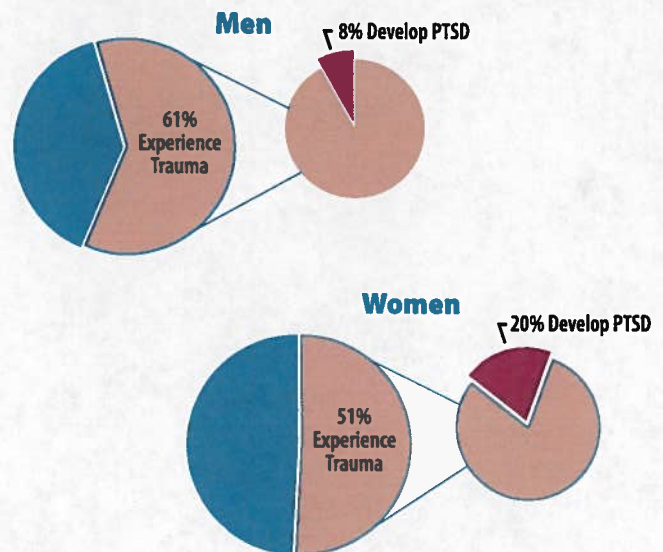
- Combat exposure
- Child sexual or physical abuse
- Terrorist attack
- Sexual/physical assault
- Serious accident
- Natural disaster

Most people have some stress-related reactions after a traumatic event. If your reactions don't go away over time and they disrupt your life, you may have PTSD.

See the next few pages for common reactions to trauma and PTSD symptoms.

How Common Is PTSD?

Many Americans have had a trauma. About 60% of men and 50% of women experience at least one traumatic event. Of those who do, about 8% of men and 20% of women will develop PTSD. For some events, like combat and sexual assault, more people develop PTSD.



What Are Some Common Stress Reactions after a Trauma?

It is normal to have stress reactions after a traumatic event. Your emotions and behavior can change in ways that are troubling to you.

Fear or anxiety

In moments of danger, our bodies prepare to fight our enemy, flee the situation, or freeze in the hope that the danger will move past us. But those feelings of alertness may stay even after the danger has passed. You may:

- feel tense or afraid
- be agitated and jumpy
- feel on alert

Sadness or depression

Sadness after a trauma may come from a sense of loss—of a loved one, of trust in the world, faith, or a previous way of life. You may:

- have crying spells
- lose interest in things you used to enjoy
- want to be alone all the time
- feel tired, empty, and numb

Guilt and shame

You may feel guilty that you did not do more to prevent the trauma. You may feel ashamed because during the trauma you acted in ways that you would not otherwise have done. You may:

- feel responsible for what happened
- feel guilty because others were injured or killed and you survived

Anger and irritability

Anger may result from feeling you have been unfairly treated. Anger can make you feel irritated and cause you to be easily set off. You may:

- lash out at your partner or spouse
- have less patience with your children
- overreact to small misunderstandings

Behavior changes

You may act in unhealthy ways. You may:

- drink, use drugs, or smoke too much
- drive aggressively
- neglect your health
- avoid certain people or situations

Most people will have some of these reactions at first, but they will get better at some time. If symptoms last longer than three months, cause you great distress, or disrupt your work or home life, you should seek help.



Real Stories: Frank



“It was nice to know there was a reason for what I was doing.”

Frank served our country in Vietnam. Before the war, he had been a happy person, but he rarely smiled once he came home.

For many years, Frank didn't talk about Vietnam, thinking he would spare people. He started drinking more. He had a short temper, and had to have his back to the wall in restaurants because he kept thinking someone was after him. He couldn't hold a job or have a successful relationship. He just felt that something was wrong. Frank didn't realize it, but he was having many of the symptoms of PTSD.

Frank went to the VA, where he was diagnosed with PTSD and given treatment and support. He's doing much better now.

“I would definitely recommend any Veteran go and get help.”

What Other Problems Do People with PTSD Experience?

People with PTSD may feel hopelessness, shame, or despair. Employment and relationship problems are also common. Depression, anxiety, and alcohol or drug use often occur at the same time as PTSD. In many cases, the PTSD treatments described in the Getting Help section will also help these other disorders, because the problems are often related and the coping skills you learn work for all of them.

How Likely Is a Person to Develop PTSD after a Trauma?

How likely you are to get PTSD can depend on things like:

- How intense the trauma was or how long it lasted
- If you lost someone you were close to or if you were hurt
- How close you were to the event
- How strong your reaction was
- How much you felt in control of events
- How much help and support you got after the event

Some groups of people may be more likely than others to develop PTSD. You are more likely to develop PTSD if you:

- Are female or a minority
- Have little education
- Had an earlier life-threatening event or trauma
- Have another mental health problem
- Have family members who have had mental health problems
- Have little support from family and friends
- Have had recent, stressful life changes