

# Trauma and PTSD:

Dispelling Myths,  
Inspiring Hope

# Trauma

Our current understanding of trauma is based on improved research about various sources of trauma, and how it impacts the mental and physical well-being of those who have experienced it. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD, is a medical diagnosis based on an individual's personal experience with trauma and subsequent impact that experience has had on their life. Not everyone who experiences trauma will develop PTSD, but everyone diagnosed with PTSD will have experienced some form of trauma.

How we think about trauma today recognizes that while single events continue to impact people and can lead to symptoms of PTSD, the impact of trauma is actually much broader, longer lasting, and far more physically and psychologically harmful than previously thought.

This expanded knowledge about trauma is reflected in the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-VTR, the manual that helps mental health clinicians understand and diagnose symptoms of mental health conditions. Earlier versions of the DSM included PTSD along other diagnoses in the category of anxiety disorders. This latest version includes the new category, "Trauma and Stressor-Related Disorders", which includes PTSD

and other conditions that can be the result of exposure to trauma.

It's important to be aware that the effects of trauma can persist even with support and treatment. Trauma can occur in response to a single experience or to repeated traumatic experiences, such as abuse and neglect. When these experiences occur during childhood, the effects of trauma can have exponential impacts well into mid-life, including increasing significant health risks and reducing life expectancy. In addition to physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach pain, people who have been exposed to trauma can also experience challenges with memory and concentration. Additionally, exposure to trauma, especially in childhood, can contribute to the development of other mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety.

It's important to remember that there is hope. Research shows that the impacts of long-term trauma can be improved when people find ways to shift their lifestyles to reduce stress in their environments, on their bodies, and on their minds. With effective treatment and support from those who care about them, the symptoms can be reduced, if not eliminated.

“ I am gentle with myself. I look back at the offending rock on the trail. No bigger than a chick pea, and with my sturdy hiking shoes, the rock was hardly to blame. And the (pain) I felt was clearly disproportionate to whatever tweak my foot / body and brain had just perceived.

“No matter”, I gently hug myself. Clearly you were badly hurt years ago and your foot / body / brain remembers. That was bad. Really bad. How are things now ....?

And I can set off again. My dog? Completely unaware. That is also helpful.

”

— 65 year old retired forensic psychiatrist and NAMI board member

# Post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD

PTSD is a clinical diagnosis defined as a person's symptomatic reactions to exposure to trauma. Traumatic events are those that pose a threat to wellbeing or even survival. PTSD is frequently associated with military events, but also includes events such as being in a car accident, experiencing a natural disaster, physical or emotional abuse and others; the belief that one might not survive causes a physiological stress response. Even if the trauma is the result of a single event, it takes time to accept that the danger has passed. People experiencing symptoms of PTSD become stuck in "stress reaction" mode, often described as "fight, flight, or freeze." In a sense, they are preparing themselves in case the event re-occurs. Over time, and with support and treatment, the stress response decreases along with the potential for long-lasting impacts on the individual's psychological and physical health.

## Symptoms specific to a diagnosis of PTSD

- Recurring intrusive thoughts about the traumatic event
- Recurring distressing dreams about the event
- Flashbacks, or feeling as if you are reliving the traumatic event
- Avoiding places, people or events that may remind them of the traumatic event
- Inability to remember some aspects of the traumatic event
- Being easily startled and being hypervigilant
- Being easily irritated or prone to outbursts
- Reckless or self-destructive behavior

## Treatment is available for trauma exposure

Regardless of the type of trauma experienced or if an actual diagnosis has been made, talking with others about the traumatic experience can help diminish its impact on your life and your ability to carry out daily activities. Counseling with peers, others with similar experiences, or a therapist in an individual or group setting can all be good options.

There are a variety of complimentary approaches that have been shown to be helpful, including mind and body relaxation strategies. Reducing stress has been shown to be effective in accelerating the healing process. In addition to counseling, the following are examples of activities known to help reduce stress in the body:

- Physical movement/exercise
- Increased sleep
- Reflection activities such as journaling or making art
- Meditation
- Sitting or walking in natural settings and focusing on the trees and other plants, animals, or bodies of water

“Civilians can have PTSD as well as veterans. Many people around the area of Louisiana where I live have PTSD because of the terrible floodings we had with several major storms. They have difficulty when it starts to rain.”

— NAMI volunteer and caregiver to a Marine veteran with PTSD

One example of how an organization has addressed the commonality of trauma and its effects was developed by The California Office of the Surgeon General known as “Stressbusters”.

This is a list of seven evidence-based practices that can diminish both the physical and psychological impacts of trauma:



There are a variety of medications available that have been shown to be effective in helping to manage PTSD symptoms. The best evidence is for selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors

(SRRIs) and serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors (SNRIs). To learn more about specific medications and treatment options visit [www.nami.org/treatment](http://www.nami.org/treatment)

“ The traumatic event I was exposed to occurred when I was 14. For 10 years I lived with untreated Posttraumatic Stress and suffered in silence as a result because I did not know what was going on with me. I began to live again when I was diagnosed and treated for Posttraumatic Stress, and if it wasn't for the therapy I received, I honestly do not think I would be here today.

— 46-year-old former gang member and NAMI board member ”

# Dispelling Myths about PTSD



## MYTH

Anyone who experiences trauma will develop PTSD.



## FACT

Most of us will, at some point in our lives, be exposed to a traumatic event that could lead to PTSD, but most individuals will not develop PTSD. There are a number of protective factors that can prevent PTSD in people exposed to trauma, including social support and having or learning positive coping skills.



## MYTH

Only people in the military who are exposed to combat develop PTSD.



## FACT

While PTSD is slightly more common among Veterans than civilians, there are a range of traumatic experiences that can contribute to the development of PTSD, and they occur in and out of the military.



## MYTH

Only adults can be diagnosed with PTSD.



## FACT

**Children can also be diagnosed with PTSD.** Like adults, PTSD is diagnosed in children when their symptoms occur after directly experiencing or witnessing traumatic event(s).



## MYTH

PTSD always occurs right after a traumatic event.



## FACT

It can take days, weeks, months, or years for PTSD to develop after a traumatic event. For some people, the response is immediate and impacts their day-to-day life very quickly; for others, PTSD symptoms may not develop until a major life change, such as retirement, separation from partner or moving.



## MYTH

I will always have PTSD symptoms.



## FACT

There are a number of effective treatments available for PTSD. Examples include cognitive behavioral therapy, cognitive processing therapy, prolonged exposure therapy and pharmacotherapy. The specific treatment plan and the response to that treatment plan varies from person to person. However, it's important to know that treatment has been shown to reduce and even eliminate symptoms of PTSD.

## References

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