

# Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder



PTSD is a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, frightening 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. This “fight-or-flight” response is a typical reaction meant to protect a person from harm.

Nearly everyone will experience a range of reactions after trauma, yet most people recover from initial symptoms naturally. Those who continue to experience problems may be diagnosed with PTSD. People who have PTSD may feel stressed or frightened even when they are not in danger.

Trauma is more common than we think but the term is often misunderstood. Trauma happens when an intense experience stuns somebody, like a bolt out of the blue; it can overwhelm a child, leaving them altered and disconnected from their body, mind and spirit. Any coping mechanisms the child may have had are undermined, and he or she feels utterly helpless. Trauma can also be

the result of ongoing fear and nervous tension.

## A traumatic event can include:

- a severe fall or broken bones
- something as simple as a scary movie
- a negative interaction, including bullying, at school
- someone close to them dying or being badly hurt

## Extreme events include:

- sexual abuse
- physical or mental abuse
- witnessing a violent crime
- events such as car accidents, floods, fires and terrorist attacks
- a friend's suicide

**No two people experience an event or situation in exactly the same way, so their internal reactions are as unique as they are. As a result, an event that causes trauma for one person may not necessarily cause trauma for another.**

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All children experience stressful events that affect how they think and feel. However, sometimes children who experience severe or repeated stress, such as from an injury, 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) which are upsetting or interfere with their relationships and activities, they may be diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). 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 behaviours. They may feel guilty for not preventing injury or deaths. They may also have thoughts of revenge.

### PTSD symptoms in children and young people include:

- Reliving the event over and over in thought or in play
- Nightmares and sleep problems
- Becoming very upset when something causes memories of the event
- Lack of positive emotions
- Intense ongoing fear or sadness

- Irritability and angry outbursts
- Constantly looking for possible threats, being easily startled
- Acting helpless, hopeless or withdrawn
- Denying that the event happened or feeling numb
- Avoiding places or people associated with the trauma

### Tips for parents:

- Speak to your GP about appropriate support
- Do not think "just getting over it" is possible
- Even if your child doesn't want to talk, keep reminding them you are always there
- Support wellbeing with healthy diet, exercise and a good sleep routine
- Educate yourself about the warning signs

