

Fact Sheet: Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Description and incidence: Of the 40 million Americans age 18 and older who suffer from an anxiety disorder, approximately 3.5%, or 7.7 million, suffer from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD can result from exposure to traumas such as a serious accident, a natural disaster, or a criminal assault. When the aftermath of a traumatic experience interferes with normal functioning, the person may be suffering from PTSD. It can occur at any age, from childhood to old age, although it occurs less frequently in the elderly. Young children who have suffered a trauma may have dreams of the event, which, within a few weeks, turn into general nightmares. Children will often relive the event through play. Traumatic stress can be cumulative over a lifetime. The increasing stress of living in the 21st century, on both a global and personal level, has considerably elevated the number of people who suffer from this disorder.

Responses to trauma include feelings of intense fear, helplessness, and/or horror. There are 3 types of generally recognized stressors:

- ◆ Threatened death or serious injury to one's person;
- ◆ Learning about the death, near death, or serious injury of a family member or close friend;
- ◆ Witnessing the death, near death, or serious injury of another person.

Symptoms: Symptoms usually begin within 3 months of a trauma, although there can be a delayed onset, and 6 months can pass between trauma and the appearance of symptoms. In some cases, years can pass before symptoms appear, in which case they are often triggered by the anniversary of the trauma or by another traumatic event. Symptoms, which may vary in frequency and intensity over time, include:

- ◆ Re-experiencing the event, which can take the form of intrusive thoughts and recollections or recurrent dreams;
 - ◆ Avoidance behavior, in which the sufferer avoids activities, situations, people, and/or conversations that he associates with the trauma;
 - ◆ General numbness and loss of interest in surroundings, which can also present as detachment;
- and
- ◆ Hypersensitivity, including inability to sleep, anxious feelings, overactive startle response, hypervigilance, irritability, and outbursts of anger.

In addition to these symptoms, children may exhibit physical symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches.

Diagnosis: For PTSD to be diagnosed, symptoms must be present for more than one month and be accompanied by a drop-off in the ability to socialize or work, or in other areas of functioning.