



## **Mental Health America of Franklin County**

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# **Anxiety Disorders: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**

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For years, this disorder was known as "shell shock" and considered to be a condition that affected only war veterans. When significant numbers of veterans returned from Vietnam, mental health professionals realized that this condition-- today called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) --was a psychiatric disorder that could be identified by specific symptoms. Researchers have also learned that anyone who has endured crisis, agony or torment can develop this disorder.

Among the people who may develop PTSD are those who are victims or witnesses of violence and/or abuse. Others have survived or witnessed a disaster, whether through natural causes such as fire or flood, or man-made causes such as car or airplane crashes, riots or military combat. For some, the symptoms of PTSD are short-lived and quickly resolved. But others will suffer for months or years, improving only with treatment.

### **What To Do When PTSD Develops**

The most important step to take if you, a friend or loved one has symptoms of PTSD is to understand that it can be treated. No one should struggle with the painful, intrusive recollections and nightmares, with the overwhelming feelings of alienation and anxiety that are part of this illness. Learning more about the illness will help you realize that the angry outbursts, emotional withdrawal, and other symptoms are the result of the disorder and not caused by family or friends. Finally, you can seek a complete evaluation with a licensed psychiatrist or psychologist to obtain an accurate and effective treatment.

### **PTSD, Like Trauma, Strikes At Random**

The chances of developing PTSD are as random as the chances of experiencing a disaster. The illness can develop in anyone of any age and in any income bracket that survives or witnesses a terrifying or horrifying event. Different people will experience the same traumas differently. One person may develop PTSD after surviving a tornado, while his or her neighbor has no problem coping with the disaster. The severity of PTSD often depends on psychological and social factors. Research indicates that the disorder is more severe among people whose trauma resulted from human action rather than from natural causes.

### **What are the Symptoms of PTSD?**

People who have PTSD re-experience their trauma in some way. Most often, they develop intrusive and recurrent memories of extremely distressful and repeated nightmares about the experience. Psychiatrists report that, some people seem to lapse into a trance and may re-enact the traumatic event.

People suffering from PTSD develop immediate emotional distress when they are exposed to situations or conditions that resemble or symbolize their trauma in some way, such as an anniversary or commemoration. A woman who was raped in a snowstorm may get depressed every time it snows, a veteran may get angry and aggressive each year on Memorial Day.

People with PTSD also avoid thinking about or doing anything that reminds them of the event. A sexual abusive victim may find it difficult to have normal, trusting romantic relationships. In some people, this avoidance is so severe that they actually respond less to their surroundings; they become detached from

others. They may no longer enjoy the activities they once loved, or be able to feel their normal range of emotions anymore.

Finally, people with PTSD experience persistent symptoms of increased anxiety, watchfulness or vigilance about what is happening in their surroundings. Many have an exaggerated startle response. For example, a survivor of a schoolyard shooting spree may "hit the dirt" and cover his head when he hears a car backfire. Other people with PTSD have difficulty falling or staying asleep. Some have trouble concentrating. Many may burst into unpredictable explosions of hostility or anger or, conversely, be unable to express any emotions at all.

### **Children's Symptoms Require Special Consideration**

Children can also develop PTSD because of experiencing a traumatic event. Many youngsters who have been sexually, physically or emotionally abused may develop the disorder. Children with PTSD may express their symptoms somewhat differently than adults. Psychiatrists warn that no one should assume that a child can't remember the trauma simply because he or she won't discuss it. Instead, children's symptoms may include recurring nightmares about the event that, over time, change of rescuing others or dreams in which they or their family are threatened.

In addition, children with PTSD may lose interest in activities they once enjoyed. Their old energy and enthusiasm may disappear. Some youngsters believe that they have no real future and, therefore, don't think about or plan for what they want to be when they grow up.

Finally, youngsters may develop unexplained headaches or stomachaches, as well as signs of vigilance exhibited as extreme watchfulness or attentiveness. Children may also cling to a parent or other loved one, show extreme fear of a particular person or place, lose a developmental skill such as toilet training, or demonstrate a lack of interest in a once-favorite toy or game.

### **Loved Ones Can Suffer Too**

Because PTSD numbs a person's positive emotions such as loving and intimacy, while increasing irritability and anger, the disorder can take a toll on loved ones. They may not understand why the person who once was affectionate and caring no longer shows interest in spouses, siblings, parents, children or close friends. Family and friends may feel that they must "walk on eggshells" around someone with PTSD because they never know when the person will burst into rage. They may become frustrated trying to encourage a person whose outlook on the future holds nothing but continued distress.

Not only can the disorder threaten the person's personal and family relationships, but it can also result in job loss or self-destructive behavior. Untreated, PTSD can develop complications such as alcoholism, drug abuse, and depression. Many of these conditions increase the risk of suicide.

### **Psychotherapy: A Key To Recovery**

PTSD patients usually respond well to treatment. Generally, most people benefit from individual or family psychotherapy. By talking with a therapist, an individual is able to better understand the illness and its effects on daily life and relationships. During therapy, the person can learn to rebuild his or her self-esteem, to cope effectively with symptoms and develop alternate ways of responding to stress.

Another form of treatment is called cognitive therapy, in which the person and therapist work to identify ways in which the person's thoughts and perceptions contribute to or reinforce symptoms. People can learn to identify negative or unhealthy thoughts and transform them into thoughts and assumptions that encourage recuperation and recovery.

Behavior therapy can help people with PTSD learn new ways of dealing with the stresses that worsen their symptoms. For example, a woman who stopped driving because she was in a terrible auto accident may be able to reduce or eliminate her anxiety about automobiles through systematic desensitization. First, she would learn deep relaxation. Then, she would list situations that are likely to provoke anxiety and rank them from least to most fearful. Working with her therapist, she would then envision or experience the least frightening situation while practicing deep relaxation. As her anxiety fades in that situation, she moves to

the next most fearful level and repeats the process until she can participate in the most feared activity without anxiety.

Because PTSD has such an effect on loved ones, some treatment plans may call for family therapy. By working together, family members can learn to recognize and understand the symptoms of the illness and more effectively cope with their responses to those symptoms. In addition, families often work together to improve their communication, parenting and stress management skills.

Group therapy offers many therapeutic advantages. Survivors of a trauma come together to share their experiences and feelings. Nothing helps to understand as much as being understood. In doing so, people realize they are not alone and are able to provide support and feedback to each other. They also realize that others see them as valuable individuals worthy of respect and friendship. That realization bolsters their self-esteem and helps reduce their sense of survivor's guilt. The group also works together to improve participants' problem-solving and communication skills.

### **Medications May Help**

Researchers have found that some people suffering from PTSD may benefit from medications. Studies have found that both heterocyclic and monoamine oxidase (MAO) inhibitor antidepressant medications can alleviate the fear, tension, excessive vigilance and other symptoms of PTSD. Other research shows that benzodiazepines, a type of medication used to ease anxiety, are helpful when a person is suffering an emotional crisis related to PTSD. Beta-blockers, medications normally used to treat heart conditions, and another compound called clonidine, have also been found to be effective in alleviating the intrusive thoughts and explosive outbursts of emotion.

These medications help reduce the symptoms of PTSD that interfere with psychotherapy. As a result, patients can benefit more from therapy sessions and regain a more fulfilling life.

**Mental Health America of Franklin County** is a private, not-for-profit organization, established in 1956. We help people navigate the mental health system. We are dedicated to promoting mental health in Franklin County through advocacy, education, and support services. Our programs include: information and referral to community mental health and alcohol/drug services; free support groups for people with mental illness and their families; an Ombudsman program that assists clients in navigating the mental health and alcohol/drug system; mental health screenings in English and Spanish; Pro Bono Counseling Program where underinsured and uninsured individuals can receive free counseling; community and professional mental health education including Get Connected; maternal mental health support and advocacy (POEM); and a quarterly newsletter featuring legislative updates and new happenings at MHAFC. We receive funding from the Franklin County ADAMH Board, United Way of Central Ohio, individuals, foundations, and corporations. To become a member or find out more information, please visit us online at [www.mhafc.org](http://www.mhafc.org).