Mental Health

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

What is post-traumatic stress disorder?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition affecting people who have experienced or witnessed a shocking, frightening event or other stressful life situation, including serious injury, violence, death, the threat of death, the loss of loved ones and the loss of a home or a job. PTSD is frequently accompanied by depression, substance abuse or other anxiety disorders. The condition is also characterized by lingering feelings of distress that may occur long after the episode has occurred and danger has passed. In addition, people can develop PTSD when their loved ones or friends suffer danger or harm.

What are the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder?

Signs of post-traumatic stress disorder include:

- Reliving the traumatizing event over and over with physical symptoms, such as sweating or a racing heart, nightmares or frightening thoughts
- Avoiding places, events, objects, thoughts or feelings related to the traumatic event
- Feeling stressed and tense or being easily startled, angered and having difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty remembering key details of the traumatic event; having negative thoughts about oneself or the world; feeling guilty, alienated and alone; and losing interest in previously enjoyable activities.

Who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder?

In general, anyone can develop PTSD. This includes war veterans, children and people who have suffered physical or sexual violence or abuse or have survived an accident or disaster or other frightening event.

What causes post-traumatic stress disorder?

Life-threatening incidents, serious injury or physical or sexual violence or abuse can trigger PTSD. In addition, some people may be more likely than others to develop PTSD after a traumatic event. These include people who work in occupations that increase the risk of exposure to traumatic events; people exposed early in life to trauma such as child abuse or neglect; people with a history

of mental health problems or with biological relatives with mental disorders; and people suffering from ongoing or severe trauma who lack a good support system of family and friends.

How is post-traumatic stress disorder diagnosed?

Typically, for doctors to diagnose an adult as having PTSD, he or she must undergo a comprehensive psychological evaluation and meet criteria in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) published by the American Psychiatric Association.

Health providers use the DSM-5 to diagnose mental health conditions, and insurance companies use the manual to reimburse patients for treatment. The guidelines doctors apply to diagnose an individual with PTSD require that someone be exposed to an event that involved the threat of death, violence or serious injury. The DSM-5 lists several methods of exposure that support a diagnosis of PTSD; for example, you or a loved one experienced or witnessed the event or you are constantly exposed to graphic details about traumatic events.

How is post-traumatic stress disorder treated?

The primary treatment for PTSD is psychotherapy that frequently includes prescription medications. Several types of psychotherapy, also called talk therapy, are used to treat PTSD. They include cognitive therapy, a way to recognize negative ways of thinking that stop you from accurately assessing normal situations. Another kind of psychotherapy is exposure therapy to help confront your fears in order to help you learn effective ways to cope with them. For example, during exposure therapy, doctors might use virtual reality programs that return you to a traumatic setting to neutralize your fears with better coping skills.

In addition, a type of psychotherapy called eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) mixes exposure therapy with a number of guided eye movements that can help those with PTSD better process traumatizing memories and how they react to them.

Doctors also prescribe several types of medications that can help improve PTSD symptoms. These include antidepressants, anti-anxiety drugs and sometimes a medication called prazosin (Minipress) that may decrease or stop the nightmares some people with PTSD suffer.

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