



SA Federation for
Mental Health

TRAUMA AND STRESSOR RELATED DISORDERS

POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

What it is:

In posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, specific mental and emotional symptoms develop after an individual has been exposed to one or more traumatic events. The traumatic event experienced can range from war, as a combatant or a civilian, physical attack or assault, sexual violence, childhood physical or sexual abuse, natural disasters or a severe car accident. The traumatic events do not have to be experienced first-hand for the individual to develop PTSD, it can also develop as a result of witnessing a traumatic event, or through indirect exposure – when a traumatic event happens to a close friend or relative.

Symptoms of PTSD can include distressing memories or dreams of the traumatic event, an avoidance of anything that is a reminder of the event, flashbacks of the event, as well as mood changes such as becoming more irritable, aggressive or hyper vigilant. In young children, developmental regression such as loss of language may occur. These symptoms can cause major disruptions and impairment to the individual's ability to function at home, school and work. Individuals with PTSD are also 80% more likely to have symptoms of at least one other mental disorder, such as depressive, bipolar or substance use disorders.

Common Symptoms:

The following symptoms must be associated with one or more traumatic events the individual has experienced, witnessed or been indirectly exposed to.

1. Recurring and distressing memories of the event
2. Recurring and distressing dreams relating to the event
3. Dissociative reactions, such as flashbacks, in which the individual may feel or act as if the traumatic event were taking place again
4. Intense psychological distress when exposed to anything that symbolises or resembles the traumatic event
5. Efforts to avoid any thoughts, feelings or memories associated with the event
6. Efforts to avoid people, places, situations or activities that are associated with, or remind the individual, of the event
7. Inability to remember important aspects of the traumatic event
8. Constant feelings of fear, guilt, anger or shame
9. An inability to experience positive emotions

10. Irritable behaviour and angry outbursts
11. Hypervigilance
12. Difficulty falling or staying asleep



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Causes:

There are a number of traumatic events that can lead to the development of PTSD. However some factors may make an individual more likely to develop the disorder. The individual's age at the time of the trauma plays a role, as does any previous traumatic experiences, especially in childhood. The severity of the trauma, perceived life threat, and degree of personal injury all play a role. As does disassociation during the traumatic event, inappropriate coping strategies and the development of acute stress disorder following the event.