

What Is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

You feel on-edge, unable to relax, and on the lookout for danger.

You feel strong emotions (e.g. fearful, anxious, mad, ashamed, or guilty) or feel numb.

You think very negatively about what happened and what it means (e.g. believing that you're still in danger, blaming yourself).

You re-experience powerful memories of what happened to you.

You cope by avoiding reminders of what happened (e.g. avoiding people, places, your own thoughts; keeping busy).

Many of us will experience trauma at some point in our lives, and it's normal to be affected by what has happened to you. If you have been through a trauma, you might feel shocked, scared, guilty, ashamed, mad, vulnerable, or numb.

With time, most people recover from their experiences without needing professional help. However, for some people the effects of trauma last for much longer, and they develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). It's thought that between 3 and 5 people out of every 100 will develop PTSD every year.

The core of PTSD: a sense of threat

When something dangerous happens, it's normal (and helpful) to feel a sense of threat – this focuses your attention on trying to get safe. The puzzle of PTSD is that people continue to feel like they are under threat, even after the danger has passed. This can be very intense and frightening.

I have flashbacks where it feels like the trauma is happening again.



I keep feeling like I'm going to see the person who attacked me.



I can't sleep more than an hour or two.



Your sense of threat in PTSD can get stuck for a few reasons:

Unprocessed memories

Psychologists think your brain processes and stores memories of traumatic events differently from normal memories. The result is that memories of your trauma might:

- 'Pop' unwanted into your mind.
- Be vivid and emotionally powerful.
- Make you think and feel that the trauma is happening again right now, and that you are in danger.

Unhelpful thinking

The way you think about what happened to you can keep your sense of threat going. Common examples of unhelpful thinking include:

- Blaming yourself for things that weren't your fault.
- Being tricked into thinking that you are in danger by flashbacks and nightmares.
- Assuming incorrectly that something terrible is likely to happen again.

Safety behaviors

It's natural to try to avoid situations that make you feel afraid, ashamed, or which trigger unwanted memories.

Unfortunately, avoidance and 'safety strategies' mean that your memories remain unprocessed, and you don't have the chance to find out whether your beliefs are true.

Treatment for PTSD

Many different psychological treatments have been proven to help get you unstuck from PTSD. These include: cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), cognitive processing (CPT), prolonged exposure (PE), and narrative exposure therapy (NET).

Although the mechanics of these therapies all differ slightly, they all share some common features: talking about what happened to you, examining how you made sense of what happened to you, reducing avoidance, and helping you to reclaim your life.