

## Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)



The Anxiety Disorders Association of America (ADAA) is a national 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote the prevention, treatment and cure of anxiety disorders and to improve the lives of all people who suffer from them. Help ADAA help others. Donate now at [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org).

For information visit [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org) or contact

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“ I go through the motions every day, but I don't feel anything or want to be around anyone. I can't focus. I have checked out emotionally. I have never felt more alone or helpless. ”

## What is posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

Many of us have witnessed or experienced a traumatic event – the loss of a loved one, a serious illness or accident, or physical assault. With time the grief passes, the pain lessens, and life returns to normal. Most people recover from traumatic events, but some continue to be depressed and anxious for months or even years. They frequently relive the trauma through flashbacks or nightmares and may feel detached or estranged from loved ones. Relaxing, concentrating, or sleeping often become difficult. These may be symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

PTSD is a serious, potentially debilitating condition that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a natural disaster, serious accident, terrorist incident, sudden death of a loved one, war, rape or other violent personal assault, and other life-threatening events. It is characterized by three main types of symptoms:

- re-experiencing the trauma through intrusive distressing recollections of the event, flashbacks, and nightmares
- emotional numbness and avoidance of places, people, and activities that are reminders of the trauma
- increased arousal such as difficulty sleeping and concentrating, feeling jumpy, being easily irritated and angered

PTSD is diagnosed after a person experiences symptoms for at least one month after a traumatic event. Symptoms may not appear until several months or even years later.

## About Anxiety Disorders

Anxiety is normal. It helps us get out of harm's way and prepare for important events, and it warns us when we need to take action. But if you have anxiety that is persistent, irrational, and overwhelming and interferes with daily activities, you may have an anxiety disorder.

The term "anxiety disorders" refers to generalized anxiety disorder (GAD), obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), panic disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), social anxiety disorder, and specific phobias.

For more information, visit [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org).

### What's the difference between normal anxiety after a traumatic event and PTSD?

#### Normal Anxiety

1. Physical assault: frightening thoughts and images, difficulty falling asleep or concentrating, and feeling agitated for days or weeks
2. Sudden death of a loved one: preferring to be alone, staying away from reminders of the person, not participating in activities with family or friends, usually for several weeks
3. Life-threatening natural disaster: feeling frightened, angry, and agitated about the loss of personal possessions

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#### PTSD

1. Physical assault: chronic, unrelenting intrusive memories, flashbacks, nightmares, or sudden floods of emotions
2. Sudden death of a loved one: Avoiding all reminders of the deceased, loss of interest in everything, withdrawal from family and friends for months or years
3. Life-threatening natural disaster: severe and recurrent anger, jumpiness, insomnia, or poor concentration long after the event

## How can PTSD affect your life?

Reliving a traumatic event can be as stressful as the original experience. Embarrassment, confusion, and frustration may accompany physical and psychological symptoms. PTSD often strains relationships when people isolate themselves from family and friends and give up activities they once enjoyed.

Women are twice as likely as men to develop PTSD, and children can also develop it. This disorder often occurs with depression, substance abuse, or other anxiety disorders.

## What causes PTSD?

Some people develop PTSD after a traumatic event, but most do not. The risk depends on many factors, including the type of traumatic event experienced, childhood adversity, biological markers, genes, and environmental and other influences.

## What treatments are available?

The main treatments for PTSD are psychotherapy (often called talk therapy), medications, or both. Everyone is different, so a treatment that works for one person may not work for another. It is important that anyone with PTSD be treated by a mental health care professional who is experienced with PTSD. Some people will need to try different treatments to find what works for their symptoms.

Most people who receive treatment for PTSD and other anxiety disorders see significant improvement in the quality of life. Cognitive-behavioral therapy, or CBT, can be helpful. Exposure therapy helps people face and control their fear by exposing them to the trauma they experienced in a safe way. Cognitive restructuring therapy helps people make sense of the bad memories. Stress inoculation training tries to reduce PTSD symptoms by teaching a person how to reduce anxiety. Virtual reality treatment consists of custom virtual environments carefully designed to support exposure therapy of anxiety disorders. A therapist controls the exposure and manipulates situations to best suit the person.

For more details about these treatments, visit [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org).



“ I was so relieved when my doctor put a name to my problem. Discovering that other people are like me gives me hope ”

## Where can U.S. veterans get help?

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD has many resources for veterans and their families, including information about specialized PTSD treatment programs. Visit [www.ncptsd.va.gov](http://www.ncptsd.va.gov).

Military Pathways® provides provides free anonymous mental health and alcohol self-assessments. Visit [www.militarymentalhealth.org](http://www.militarymentalhealth.org).

Your local VA Hospital can refer you to a specialist. Call the VA Health Resource Service Center toll-free at 1-877-222-8387 for more information.

## How can ADAA help you?

Suffering from PTSD or any anxiety disorder can interfere with your life. ADAA can provide the resources that will help you and your loved ones better understand your condition, connect you with a community of people who know what you are experiencing, and assist you in finding mental health professionals who can help.

Visit ADAA at [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org) to locate doctors and therapists who treat PTSD and other anxiety disorders and as well as local support groups. Learn about the causes, symptoms, and treatments for anxiety disorders; review questions to ask a therapist or doctor; and find helpful materials to help family and loved ones. ADAA is here to help you make the best decisions so that you can get on with your life.

# Take Five & Manage Your Anxiety

You are not alone. Talk to someone – a friend, loved one or doctor. Get help. Anxiety disorders are real, serious, and treatable.

Whether you have normal anxiety or an anxiety disorder, these strategies will help you cope:

Exercise.  
Go for a walk or jog.  
Do yoga.  
Dance. Just get moving!

Talk to someone ... spouse, significant other, friend, child, or doctor.

Keep a daily journal. Become aware of what triggers your anxiety.

Eat a balanced diet. Don't skip meals. Avoid caffeine, which can trigger anxiety symptoms.

Visit [www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org). Let us help you help yourself.

## Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Self-Test

If you suspect that you might suffer from PTSD, answer the questions below and share them with your health care professional.

Y  N Have you experienced or witnessed a life-threatening event that caused intense fear, helplessness, or horror?

Do you re-experience the event in at least one of the following ways?

- Y  N Repeated, distressing memories, or dreams
- Y  N Feeling as if the event were happening again (flashbacks or sense of reliving it)
- Y  N Intense physical or emotional distress when you are exposed to things that remind you of the event

Do reminders of the event affect you in at least three of the following ways?

- Y  N Avoiding thoughts, feelings, or conversations about it
- Y  N Avoiding activities, places, or people who remind you of it
- Y  N Blanking on important parts of it
- Y  N Losing interest in significant activities of your life
- Y  N Feeling detached from other people
- Y  N Sensing that your future has shrunk (i.e., you don't expect to have a career, marriage, children, or normal life span)

Y  N Feeling a restricted range of emotions

Are you troubled by one or more of the following?

- Y  N Problems sleeping
- Y  N Irritability or outbursts of anger
- Y  N Problems concentrating
- Y  N Feeling "on guard"
- Y  N An exaggerated startle response
- Y  N Symptoms lasting more than a month

Having more than one illness at the same time can make it difficult to diagnose and treat the different conditions. Depression and substance abuse are among the conditions that occasionally complicate PTSD and other anxiety disorders.

Y  N Have you experienced changes in eating or sleeping habits?

On more days than not, do you feel..

- Y  N sad or depressed?
- Y  N disinterested in life?
- Y  N worthless or guilty?

During the last year, has the use of alcohol or drugs...

- Y  N resulted in your failure to fulfill responsibilities with work, school, or family?
- Y  N placed you in a dangerous situation, such as driving under the influence?
- Y  N gotten you arrested?
- Y  N continued despite causing problems for you or your loved ones?