

# When to See a Professional 1

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## Trauma and PTSD

No discussion about stress, worry and anxiety would be complete without a consideration of PTSD, or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, as well as trauma. These are serious issues that will not simply disappear. They require your attention and professional help.

For most people, the idea that an extremely traumatic event could have profound effects on wellbeing seems obvious. However, you may be surprised to learn that that this well studied human response is sometimes misunderstood.



The banner features a bright orange background. At the top center is a white icon of a beaker with a flame, followed by the word "EXPLORABLE" in a white, sans-serif font. Below this, the phrase "Quiz Time!" is written in a white, cursive font. At the bottom, there are three white-bordered boxes, each containing a different image and a quiz title. The first box shows a pair of red roller skates on a wooden floor, with the text "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2". The second box shows a fan of colorful pens, also with the text "Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2". The third box shows a Ferris wheel at sunset, with the text "Quiz: Flags in Europe". To the right of these boxes is a white arrow pointing right with the text "See all quizzes =>".

## What Is PTSD?

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, or the DSM, symptoms from three separate categories need to be present for a mental health professional to diagnose post-traumatic stress. A PTSD response can occur after any event that a person perceives to be life threatening, or else witnessing a life threatening situation occurring for someone else.

## Your Perception Counts the Most

Importantly, the situation doesn't need to actually be life threatening – only perceived that way. What's more, the trauma needs to be understood at the time to be out of the person's control and unescapable. Vicarious trauma can occur when this intense feeling of being very close to death is experienced on someone else's

behalf. Violent crimes, rape, war experiences, natural disasters and accidents can all fit this bill, but many people develop PTSD symptoms from merely the threat of these occurring.

## **Re-Experiencing Symptoms**

When a human being's life is threatened, the entire organism becomes hyper-alert, ready to mobilize any resources needed to "fight or flight." It's theorized that this heightened state is what sharpens the memory for traumatic events, causing people to feel like details are painfully burnt or etched into the memory with more intensity than other memories.

Re-experiencing symptoms include flashbacks, intrusive nightmares or being unable to stop thoughts and memories of the event rushing into awareness. The mind may feel like it's "replaying" all the stressful parts of a horrible movie, perhaps in an attempt to make sense of what were incredibly upsetting stimuli.

## **Hypervigilance Symptoms**

Stressful events can flood the body with adrenaline and cortisol, and cause ripple effects throughout the entire organism. The hypothalamus, pituitary gland and adrenal glands are in constant, delicate balance with each other and trauma can throw this out of whack.

## **What Is the Result of Hypervigilance?**

It can include symptoms like insomnia, being unable to focus on what's at hand, jumpiness and a heightened startle response. Family members of those who suffer PTSD know about this last phenomenon all too well: they'll approach their loved one from behind or surprise them in some way and their loved one may scream, jump or even lash out violently. It's as though the body's set point for panic has become disturbed, and the mind is constantly on the lookout for more potential trauma.

## **Avoidance Symptoms**

The final cluster of symptoms, that may lead to a PTSD diagnosis, includes efforts to avoid everything that reminds the person of the original trauma. This could mean deliberately avoiding the street where a car accident occurred, ending conversations that might lead to discussion of the trauma, even "forgetting" about information related to the event.

The human mind has a remarkable ability to learn and adapt to its environment, and wanting to prevent further trauma is understandable. Some PTSD sufferers may find themselves developing mild phobias around certain words, images or places due to the trauma they associate with them.

## **Could You Have PTSD?**

Only a qualified professional can make a diagnosis. Lay people may be tempted to think that a particular event doesn't count as traumatic enough, or otherwise expect that a person should be more traumatized given a certain event. The truth is, we all respond differently to stress, and whether PTSD develops or not has to do with the intensity of the event, but also the person's appraisal of the situation.

A child, for example, may more readily feel out of control and threatened in a situation than an adult. Some researchers have found that in some cases, traumas like natural disasters are not as damaging psychologically as you would expect, probably because many people share the same experience and this

feeling of bonding helps to moderate the feeling of helplessness that can trigger PTSD.

## **When to Seek a Professional?**

If you or someone you know has experienced a traumatic event or is otherwise experiencing some of these symptoms, consult a professional. This is especially true if symptoms are getting in the way of work or relationships.

## **Treatment**

Thankfully, treatment for PTSD is comprehensive and often has excellent outcomes. A psychiatrist or psychologist may prescribe anti-anxiety medication or suggest natural relaxant to bring about some calm. When combined with therapy, this can be extremely effective.

## **Therapeutic Practices**

Therapeutic intervention can involve talking through the trauma to make sense of the event, as well as to learn coping techniques, share experiences and get relief that the problem is not unusual. The therapist may also gently suggest desensitizing the person to stimuli they are avoiding, such as asking them to gradually become more comfortable getting back on horseback after a traumatic riding accident, for example.

Lastly, a therapist may also suggest ways to maintain a support network, provide information about the disorder and suggest mindfulness techniques or even prayer as a way to moderate the stress response and find some meaning in the trauma.

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