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General Information

Acute stress disorder (ASD) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are conditions caused by experiencing or witnessing a traumatic event. You can experience a wide range of physical and mental reactions in response. These are normal reactions to an abnormal event, but they could affect your every day life.

What are traumatic events?

Traumatic events are events that are distressing, terrifying or life threatening. You can experience a single event or multiple events.

Examples of traumatic events include:

- natural disasters (floods, fires, earthquakes)
- physical or sexual assault
- serious accidents
- sudden death of a loved one
- receiving a life-threatening diagnosis

This booklet is meant to teach you about acute stress disorder and post-traumatic stress disorder; what they are, what they look and feel like, and what can be done. You can also find more information and resources at the end of this booklet.

Acute Stress Disorder (ASD)

What is acute stress disorder (ASD)?

Acute stress disorder (ASD) involves mental and physical reactions that happen after a traumatic event. It is a short-term condition that lasts up to 30 days. The chances of getting ASD are higher when the event is severe or happens repeatedly. Many people get better on their own, but some might need help from therapy or treatment.

What does ASD look and feel like?

You might:

- feel in a daze or as if time has slowed
- get upset or scared when reminded of the event (for example, by going to a similar location, or by hearing sounds like those heard during the event)
- feel irritated or have angry outbursts
- feel you cannot be happy or satisfied
- feel paranoid
- be easily startled
- have trouble concentrating
- have nightmares or flashbacks of the event
- have poor sleep
- have thoughts of the event that intrude your everyday life
- forget parts of the event
- avoid reminders of the event (people, places, conversations, activities, objects, and situations)

These signs can start right after the event and they vary from person to person. You need to have first had a traumatic event and a doctor would make sure there is no other reason for ASD. Only a doctor can diagnose you with ASD.

What can be done for ASD?

Friends and family can provide emotional support to help you recover from ASD. It can be helpful to have someone understand your distress by giving you a chance to talk about what happened. If you do not want to talk or you are still feeling distressed, it might not be the right time to talk.

Sometimes doctors give medications to help with anxiety or sleep. Antidepressant medications are usually not given. Talk to a doctor or other health professional if you are worried about how you are coping with the event.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

What is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)?

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a set of reactions that can occur after someone has been through a traumatic event. These reactions last more than a month and could affect your every day life.

What does PTSD look and feel like?

Doctors diagnose with PTSD when:

- A traumatic event has happened.
- You have symptoms from each of the 4 categories below.
- Your symptoms last for 1 month or longer.
- Your symptoms interfere with everyday life.

You could notice signs within a month of a traumatic event, but sometimes they might not appear until years after the event. Symptoms could include:

- flashbacks
- nightmares
- severe anxiety
- uncontrollable thoughts about the event

PTSD symptoms are generally grouped into these 4 categories:

Intrusion symptoms

This is when thoughts about the event can intrude into your everyday life. These can take the form of nightmares or flashbacks. Some people have severe flashbacks where they relive the event as if it was actually happening, rather than simply remembering it.

Avoidance

Some activities, situations or people might be reminders of what you experienced. You may find yourself trying to avoid these reminders, along with trying to avoid thinking or talking about the trauma.

Negative thoughts and feelings

Depression is also common in PTSD. You might also notice these changes in how you think and feel:

- having negative thoughts about yourself or others
- feeling hopeless about the future
- feeling guilty or having survivor's guilt
- feeling detached from family and friends
- losing interest in activities you used to enjoy
- finding it hard to feel happy or satisfied
- forgetting parts of the event

Changes in alertness and reactions

These are changes in physical and emotional reactions. These are also called arousal symptoms. You might:

- be easily startled or frightened
- be paranoid and constantly on guard for danger
- have trouble falling asleep
- have trouble concentrating
- have reckless behavior
- have angry outbursts

What can be done for PTSD?

Prevention

After surviving a traumatic event, many people have PTSD-like symptoms at first. Fear, anxiety, anger, depression, guilt — all are common reactions to trauma. However, the majority of people exposed to trauma do not develop post-traumatic stress disorder.

Getting timely help and support may prevent normal stress reactions from getting worse and developing into PTSD. This can mean turning to family and friends who will listen and offer comfort, or seeking out a mental health professional for therapy. Some people may also find it helpful to turn to their spiritual community.

The goal of therapy is to help you process the trauma once the therapist has made sure you are safe. It is helpful to develop skills to manage your emotions. These are some examples of the types of therapies used for treating PTSD.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT)

A therapist will teach you how to cope with your anxiety and help you change your harmful thoughts, feelings and behaviours. This therapy can be done one on one or in a group.

Exposure therapy

In exposure therapy, you are guided to relive parts of the experience. This will let you work through the trauma and face your fears. Exposure therapy is often a part of CBT therapy.

Psychodynamic therapy

Psychodynamic therapy is based on the idea that the past has an effect on your current experiences and feelings. It focuses on the emotions you had because of your trauma and teaches you how to manage them.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

In EMDR, you recall your traumatic experience while a therapist directs your eye movement. This technique works by diverting your attention from your negative thinking and reactions.

Group therapy

In group therapy, you talk with a group of people who also have PTSD. Sharing your story with others may help you cope with your experience and build self-confidence. You will learn to focus on your present life rather than feeling overwhelmed by your past.

Family therapy

In this type of therapy, you talk about your experience, treatment and recovery with your family. Your loved ones can also have a chance to talk about their fears and concerns. This way, your family can learn to support you. You can have both individual therapy for your PTSD and family therapy to help you with your relationships.

Drug therapy

Antidepressants are drugs used to treat depression. They are also commonly used to treat PTSD. Your doctor might give you antidepressants like selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), mirtazapine or venlafaxine.

Your doctor may also give you drugs like olanzapine, quetiapine or prazosin. These are to help with sleep and nightmares, but they do not treat PTSD.

How long does treatment last?

Treatment for PTSD can last 3 to 6 months. If you have other mental health conditions as well, treatment for PTSD may last for 1 to 2 years or longer.

You and your health care provider decide a plan of treatment depending on your personal needs and health history.

What are other common concerns?

Untreated, PTSD can lead to many of these problems and keep you from having a normal life:

- drinking or substance misuse
- feelings of hopelessness, shame, or despair
- job and career problems
- relationship problems like divorce and violence
- physical symptoms such as feeling tired, poor concentration and a racing heartbeat

PTSD can disrupt not just your life but also the lives of your friends and family. This makes it all the more important to get help and treatment for PTSD.

How do children react to trauma?

Children who have experienced a traumatic event may react differently than adults. In children less than 6 years of age, you might see them:

- wet the bed after having learned to use the toilet
- forget how to or be unable to talk
- act out the event during playtime
- be clingy with a parent or adult

Older children and teens usually react the way adults do. They may also be disruptive and disrespectful, or have destructive behaviors. They may feel guilty for not preventing injury or death, or could have thoughts of revenge.

How can I help myself?

Talk to people with similar experiences

It may be very helpful for you to share your experiences with others who have been through something similar. This can be a step away from isolating yourself and towards regaining control of your life.

Give yourself time

Everyone will have their own unique responses, and will need to go at their own pace. Talking about your experience before you are ready might not be helpful. It may make you relive memories of the event, increasing the risk of flashbacks or nightmares. Give yourself time to feel ready to talk about your experiences.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a technique for becoming more aware of the present. It can help you to enjoy the world around you, and understand yourself better. You can practise mindfulness through meditation.

How can I help someone with PTSD?

If you know someone with PTSD, the most important thing you can do is to help them get the right diagnosis and treatment. You may need to help make an appointment and visit the doctor with them.

Encourage the person to stay in treatment, or to look for different treatment if they do not start to get better after 6 to 8 weeks.

To help a friend or relative, you can:

- Give emotional support, understanding, patience, and encouragement.
- Learn about PTSD so you can understand what they are experiencing.
- Listen carefully. Pay attention to your relative's feelings and the situations that may trigger PTSD symptoms.
- Do activities together like walks and outings as positive distractions
- Remind them that, with time and treatment, they can get better.

Never ignore comments about death or wanting to die.

What if I or someone I know is in crisis?

If you are thinking about harming yourself, or know someone who is, get help immediately.

You might have to help your friend or family member do these things:

- Call 911, or go to an emergency room. An emergency room doctor can provide temporary help and can tell you where and how to get more support.
- Call the family doctor.
- Do not leave the suicidal person alone.

What other resources are there?

Anxiety Canada

Visit anxietycanada.com or call 604- 620-0744 for more information and community resources on anxiety.

BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions

Visit heretohelp.bc.ca for information and personal stories.

VictimLinkBC

If your trauma is a result of a crime, call 1-800-563-0808 (Toll free in BC and Yukon) 24 hours a day.

Visit victimlinkbc.ca for more information.

HealthLinkBC

Call 811 or visit healthlinkbc.ca to access free, non -urgent health information for anyone in your family. This includes mental health information. You can also speak to a registered nurse about symptoms you are worried about, or ask a pharmacist about your medications.

Visit your doctor

You can ask your doctor for help and discuss support options with them.

www.fraserhealth.ca

This information does not replace the advice given to you by your healthcare provider.

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To order, visit: patienteduc.fraserhealth.ca