

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) & Trauma

Definitions

PTSD: a mental illness that develops after exposure to trauma, involving death or the threat of death, serious injury, or sexual violence. Exposure to trauma can involve: direct experience with the event, witnessing the event, learning that it occurred to a close friend or family member, or repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the event. Trauma: an event or situation which is very frightening, overwhelming, and causes a lot of distress.

Symptoms

Must occur frequently, over a period of at least a month, and interfere with daily functioning

- Intrusive symptoms (at least 1 for diagnosis): intrusive thoughts or images about the event, dreams or nightmares about the event or similar events, flashbacks or illusions about the event, physical arousal when reminded of event
- Avoidance symptoms (at least 1 for diagnosis): avoidance of thoughts or feelings associated with event, avoidance of reminders of the trauma
- Negative changes in thinking or mood (at least 2 for diagnosis): inability to recall important aspects of event, ongoing negative beliefs and expectations about oneself, unnecessarily blaming self or others for causing traumatic event or consequences. persistent negative trauma-related emotions, decreased interest in previously significant/enjoyable activities, feeling detached/alienated from others, restricted emotions
- Arousal (at least 2 for diagnosis): irritable or aggressive behaviour, self-destructive or careless behaviour, hypervigilance, exaggerated startle response, difficulty concentrating, changes/disturbances in sleep

Occurrence & Prevalence

- Majority of people exposed to a traumatic event experience some symptoms within the first weeks. Most symptoms go away within one month, and over half of those initially distressed recover within the first year
- Predisposition factors: length of time the trauma lasted, the number of other traumatic experiences in the person's life, their reaction to the event, and support they received after
- First responder populations (military, police, fire fighters, paramedics, doctors, nurses) experience higher rates of PTSD compared to other occupations
- Women are twice as likely to develop PTSD as men

Treatment

Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)
Exposure Therapy (EXP)
Eye Movement Desensitization &
Reprocessing (EMDR)

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)
Brief Eclectic Psychotherapy (BEP)
Prolonged Exposure Therapy
Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET)

Adjunct Supports / Treatment -- Support Groups, Medication, Family Support, Exercise

More Information

Canadian Psychological Association – www.cpa.ca Anxiety Disorders Association of Canada – www.anxietycanada.ca
Canadian Mental Health Association - www.cmha.ca/mental_health_post-traumatic-stress-disorder
Anxiety Disorders Association of British Columbia – www.anxietybc.com/adults/ptsd

Sources

American Psychological Association (2016). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Online
Canadian Mental Health Association (2016). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Online
Anxiety BC (2016). Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. Online