Patient Information

The Aftereffects Of Trauma

Have you lived through a scary and dangerous event? If so, read through the statements below and answer “yes” if they apply to you or a loved one:

- I suddenly feel like the terrible event is happening all over again.
- I have nightmares and scary memories of the event.
- I stay away from places that remind me of the event.
- I jump and feel upset when the unexpected happens.
- I have a hard time trusting other people.
- I get mad very easily.
- I feel guilty because others died and I lived.
- I have trouble sleeping and my muscles are tense.

If you answered yes to some of these questions, you or your loved one may have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

PTSD is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event in which physical harm occurred or was threatened. Families of victims can also develop the disorder.

PTSD Symptoms

Many people with PTSD repeatedly re-experience the ordeal in flashbacks, memories, nightmares or frightening thoughts, especially when they are exposed to events reminiscent of the trauma. Anniversaries of the event can also trigger symptoms. People with PTSD also experience emotional numbness and sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety and irritability or outbursts of anger.

Feelings of intense guilt are also common. Most people with PTSD try to avoid any reminders or thoughts of the ordeal. PTSD is diagnosed when symptoms last more than 1 month.

PTSD can develop at any age, including in childhood. Symptoms typically begin within 3 months of a traumatic event. However, symptoms sometimes don’t begin until years later. Once PTSD occurs, the severity and duration of the illness vary.

PTSD Treatment

Research also shows that talking about experiences soon after a catastrophic event may reduce some of the symptoms of PTSD. Also, cognitive-behavioral therapy, group therapy and exposure therapy (gradually and repeatedly reliving the experience under controlled conditions) are effective. Medications may help ease associated symptoms of depression and anxiety and help promote sleep.

Coexisting Conditions

Sometimes, coexisting depression, alcohol or drug abuse or another anxiety disorder accompany PTSD. Common coexisting conditions include:

- headaches
- gastrointestinal complaints
- immune system problems
- dizziness
- chest pain
- discomfort in other parts of the body.

When PTSD is diagnosed, your NP will refer you to a mental health professional with experience treating PTSD.

Helping Children Cope

Early intervention to help children who have suffered trauma is critical, but it might not always be possible. However, the following steps can be helpful at anytime to parents:

- Explain the episode of violence or disaster as well as you can.
- Encourage him to express his feelings and listen without passing judgment.
- Do not force discussion of the traumatic event.
- Let him know it’s normal to feel upset.
- Allow time for him to experience and talk about his feelings. At home, a gradual return to routine can be reassuring.
- If he is scared, reassure him that you love him and will take care of him. Stay together as a family as much as possible.
- If bedtime behavior is a problem, give him extra time and reassurance. Let him sleep with a light on or with you for a limited time.
- Reassure him that the traumatic event was not his fault.
- Do not criticize regressive behavior.
- Allow him to cry; don’t expect him to be brave or tough.
- Encourage him to feel in control and let him make some decisions about meals, family activities, etc.
- Take care of yourself so you can take care of your child.

—Based on information adapted from the National Mental Health Association and the National Institutes of Health.