

# Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): Recognizing the Signs



***Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that is triggered by experiencing a traumatic event. If you experienced a traumatic event more than a month ago, and still show signs of post-traumatic stress, you may have PTSD. It is important to get help as soon as possible. The information in this tip sheet will help you recognize the signs of PTSD, and know when to seek professional help.***

*After experiencing a stressful or traumatic event:  
  
Be patient with yourself and those around you.  
  
Give everyone time to cope, adapt and heal.*

## WHAT ARE THE SIGNS OF POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS?

Traumatic events are events that we perceive as terrifying and dangerous, and can cause injury or even death. After experiencing such an event it is not uncommon to show signs of post-traumatic stress reactions, feel overwhelmed, and find it difficult to cope. But with time and support, these reactions usually diminish, and people recover. There are three main types of post-traumatic stress reaction you can have: re-experiencing, avoidance and hyper-arousal.

### Re-experiencing: Reliving what happened

After going through a traumatic event some re-experiencing is natural. Thinking, dreaming about what happened, especially at first, is how you process your experience and recover. However, re-experiencing also means that you keep thinking about what happened, even when you don't want to. Sights, smells, and sounds can unexpectedly remind you of the event; this can make you very upset. Nightmares and frequent flashbacks during the day can make you feel as if you are reliving the event all over again. When re-experiencing does not lessen with time, it can become very distressing.



#### **Most common reactions:**

- ❖ ***Thinking a lot about and reliving what happened***
- ❖ ***Having flashbacks of the event***
- ❖ ***Having nightmares about the event***
- ❖ ***Getting upset when reminded of the event***

### Avoidance: Staying away from reminders of the event

After experiencing a traumatic event, for a short-period of time avoidance is a natural and normal reaction. Avoidance means that you are trying not to think or talk about the traumatic event, or anything else that is related to it. You may avoid places and people that remind you of the event, and to avoid painful feelings, you may numb your emotions and feel emotionally "dead".



#### **Most common reactions:**

- ❖ ***Not wanting to talk about what happened***
- ❖ ***Wanting to stay away from reminders of what happened, e.g. from specific places and people***
- ❖ ***Being afraid of things you were not afraid of before***
- ❖ ***Feeling emotionally numb and hopeless about the future***
- ❖ ***Avoiding activities you used to enjoy***
- ❖ ***Not enjoying being with friends and family***
- ❖ ***Problems with concentrating***

However, when it is extreme, avoidance can become a real problem. It can interfere with your basic daily activities and stop you from doing things you would otherwise like to do. Avoidance can also make you isolated. If avoidance takes over your life it can be a sign of PTSD, and you should consider seeking help.

## Hyper-arousal: feeling anxious, restless and jumpy

Hyper-arousal, also known as the “fight or flight” reaction, is a normal reaction to a traumatic event that has threatened your safety. However, this reaction should not last and your body should turn it off once you are safe again. When this does not occur, you are constantly “on guard”, and cannot rest and as a result. You may have trouble sleeping, concentrating, and may be irritable. You may be jumpy, feel your heart racing, and be startled by sudden noises. Being in a state of constant hyper-arousal can be very unpleasant and frightening, and it can cause problems in daily functioning.



### **Most common reactions:**

- ❖ **Worrying a lot/believing that something else bad will happen**
- ❖ **Startling easily, e.g. jumping at sudden noises**
- ❖ **Feeling irritable and having angry outbursts**
- ❖ **Having trouble remembering and paying attention to things**
- ❖ **Having difficulty sleeping**
- ❖ **Self-destructive behavior, e.g. drinking too much**

## WHEN SHOULD I SEEK HELP?

Seek professional help if you have post-traumatic stress reactions (re-experiencing, avoiding and hyper-arousal) that last longer than a month, are severe, or if you feel you're having trouble getting on with your daily life. Getting treatment as soon as possible can prevent PTSD symptoms from getting worse or becoming long-lasting.

In some cases, post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms may be so severe that you need help urgently, especially if you are thinking about harming yourself or someone else. If this happens, call 911.

Seek professional help when you have traumatic stress symptoms that:

- ❖ Last more than a month after experiencing trauma
- ❖ Get worse instead of fading away
- ❖ Get in the way of doing your usual daily activities and fulfilling your responsibilities
- ❖ Stop you from doing things you once enjoyed

## WHERE CAN I GET HELP?

If you feel overwhelmed or are concerned about someone else, you can find help by calling **1-800 LIFENET**. LifeNet is a free, confidential helpline for New York City residents, available 24/7, with trained staff ready to take your calls.

***If you or anyone you know  
feels overwhelmed –  
reach out.***

***Help is available!***

**1-800-LIFENET**  
**1-800-543-3638 (English)**  
**1-877-Ayudese**  
**1-877-298-3373 (Spanish)**  
**1-877-990-8585 (Chinese)**  
**1-212-982-5284 (TTY)**

