

FORM 6.4. Information for Patients about Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

What Is Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?

Posttraumatic stress disorder (or PTSD) is a common reaction to very stressful or traumatic events. Many different kinds of events can lead to PTSD, including being in a car accident; being raped or being the victim of another crime; being physically or sexually abused; living through a disaster such as a flood or a bombing; or seeing someone else die.

People with PTSD have three main types of problems or symptoms:

1. **Reliving the trauma.** This can include memories that seem out of control, nightmares, and flashbacks that make people feel as if they are living the event all over again. Memories often come back when something people see or hear reminds them of the event.
2. **Avoiding.** Because it is upsetting to remember what happened, people with PTSD try not to think about it. They also stay away from people, places, or things that bring back memories. Often they feel numb or detached from other people. Some turn to alcohol or drugs to dull the pain.
3. **Signs of physical stress.** These can include trouble sleeping, feeling irritable or angry all the time, trouble concentrating, and feeling tense or on guard.

What Causes Posttraumatic Stress Disorder?

When people live through a trauma, the memories of what happened get connected in their minds with what they saw, heard, smelled, or felt at the time. Later a similar sight, sound, smell, or other feeling can bring the memories and emotions flooding back.

A second reason why the memories come back is that people have a need to make sense of what happened. Traumatic events often make people question things they once believed—for example, that the world is basically safe or that bad things won't happen to them. To understand the trauma, they have to think about it. But thinking about it brings the memories and feelings back. So they try not to think about it. Instead of finding understanding and peace, people often end up going back and forth between remembering and trying to forget.

How Does Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Develop?

Most people begin to have symptoms of PTSD shortly after the trauma. For about half of these people, the symptoms get better on their own within 3 months. For others, the symptoms can last for years. Some people don't start to have symptoms until many years after the event.

How Does Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Help?

There are three steps in cognitive-behavioral therapy for PTSD. First, your therapist will teach you ways to cope with the feelings and tension that come with the memories. These include ways to relax your body and to take your mind off the pain. (cont.)

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Second, your therapist will help you face the memories. He or she will guide you in retelling the story of what happened. The more you do this, the less upsetting the memories will become, and the more you will be able to find a sense of peace.

Finally, your therapist will teach you ways to change negative thinking and handle problems in your life.

A number of studies have found that cognitive-behavioral therapy helps people with PTSD feel better. These studies have included combat veterans as well as victims of rape, assault, and other traumas.

How Long Does Therapy Last?

How long treatment for PTSD lasts depends on how many traumas you suffered and how severe they were, how bad your symptoms are now, and how many other problems you are having in your life. For people who have been through a single traumatic event, 12 to 20 sessions are usually enough. Most of these sessions will be 45 to 50 minutes long, but a few may be as long as 90 minutes.

Can Medications Help?

Drugs by themselves are usually not enough for treating PTSD. However, they can be helpful for some people when combined with therapy. Your physician or a psychiatrist can suggest which medication might be best for you.

What Is Expected of You as a Patient?

It is best not to start treatment for PTSD if you are currently abusing drugs or alcohol or have a major crisis in your life. Your therapist can help you deal with these problems first, and then can help you begin working on your PTSD symptoms. Other than that, all you need to do is to be willing to try therapy and to spend some time each week practicing the things you learn.
