

Mental Health

Fact Sheet

Rimrock
Foundation

Mental Health Services

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Treatments developed through research are now helping many people with PTSD deal effectively with their symptoms.

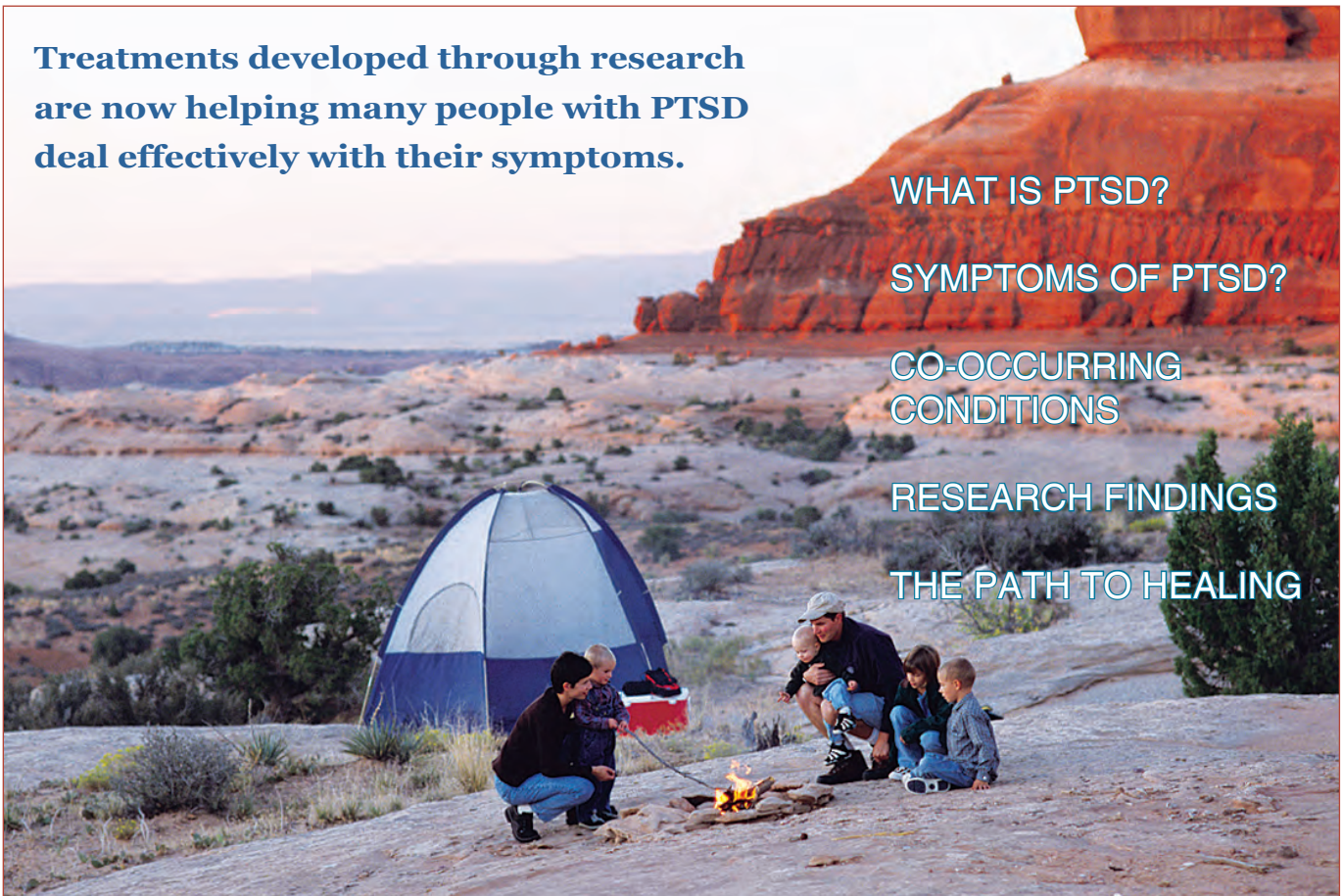
WHAT IS PTSD?

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WHAT IS PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened.

Among those who may experience PTSD are military veterans; rescue workers involved in the aftermath of disasters, and people who witness traumatic events. Traumatic events that can trigger PTSD include violent personal assaults such as rape or mugging, natural or human-caused disasters, accidents, or military combat.

Research is also helping scientists better understand this condition and how it affects the brain and the rest of the body. About 3.6 percent of U.S. adults ages 18 to 54 have PTSD during the course of a given year. About 30 percent of the men and women who have spent time in war zones experience PTSD. Through research, effective treatments have been developed to help people with PTSD.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF PTSD?

Many people with PTSD repeatedly re-experience the ordeal in the form of flashback episodes, memories, nightmares, or frightening thoughts, especially when they are exposed to events or objects reminiscent of the trauma. Anniversaries of these events 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 this illness try to avoid any reminders or thoughts of the ordeal.**

Flashbacks can happen many times each day and are one of the major symptoms of PTSD, and are not a “remembering” of the traumatic experience, but a “reliving” of it. The mind of the person experiencing a flashback is essentially transported in time and place to the traumatic event.

This illness can develop at any age, including in childhood. Symptoms typically begin within 3 months of a traumatic event, although occasionally they do not begin until years later. Once occurring, the severity and duration of the illness varies with some people recovering within 6 months, while others suffer much longer.

CO-OCCURRING CONDITIONS

Co-occurring depression, alcohol or other substance abuse, or another anxiety disorder are common. The likelihood of treatment success is increased when these other conditions are appropriately identified and treated as well. Other common symptoms of PTSD include headaches, gastrointestinal complaints, immune system problems, dizziness, chest pain, or discomfort in other parts of the body. Often, doctors treat the symptoms without being aware that they stem from PTSD. Primary care providers need to ask patients about experiences with violence, recent losses, and traumatic events, especially if symptoms keep recurring.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Studies in humans have focused on pinpointing the specific brain areas and circuits involved in anxiety and fear, which underline this type of anxiety disorder. Fear, an emotion that evolves to deal with danger, causes an automatic, rapid protective response that occurs without the need for conscious thought.

People who have been abused as children or who have had other previous traumatic experiences are more likely to develop PTSD. In addition, it used to be believed that people who tend to be emotionally numb after a trauma were showing a healthy response, but now some researchers suspect that people who experience this emotional distancing may be more prone to PTSD.

Recent research findings show:

- ❑ People with PTSD tend to have abnormal levels of key hormones involved in response to stress. Some studies have shown that cortisol levels are lower than normal and epinephrine and norepinephrine are higher than normal.
- ❑ When people are in danger, they produce high levels of natural opiates, which can temporarily mask pain. Some people continue to produce these higher levels even after the danger has passed; this may lead to the blunted emotions associated with PTSD.
- ❑ More than twice as many women as men experience PTSD following exposure to trauma. Family members of victims also can develop the disorder. This illness can occur in people of any age, including children and adolescents.

THE PATH TO HEALING

Anyone with PTSD should be under the care of a psychiatrist skilled in the diagnosis and treatment of this illness. Other mental health professionals, such as psychologists and psychiatric social workers, can assist in providing the person and family with additional approaches to treatment.

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioral therapy, group therapy, and exposure therapy, in which the patient repeatedly relives the frightening experience under controlled conditions to help him or her work through the trauma. Studies have also shown that medications help ease the symptoms of depression and anxiety which often accompany PTSD. Experience has shown that debriefing people very soon after a catastrophic event may reduce some of the symptoms.

Rimrock Foundation has four Crisis Stabilization beds available for patients who may need a short-term stay for the purpose of stabilizing them on prescribed medications or who may need a safe place with medical monitoring and evaluation but who do not require the full services of an acute psychiatric facility.

For further information on Rimrock Foundation's treatment of PTSD, call Jen Porter, Admissions Supervisor, at 1-800-227-3953 or 1-406-248-3175, visit our website at www.rimrock.org, or contact the Rimrock Foundation Library at the above numbers.



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