



Understanding Trauma and PTSD

Department of Interior
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Objectives

By the end of this training, you will know:

- The causes, symptoms and treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- To understand common myths and facts about PTSD
- Helpful ways to respond when someone has PTSD

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a common, treatable, but often misunderstood behavioral health condition that can occur after someone experiences a traumatic event.

Understanding PTSD helps to remove stereotypes and stigmas.

Trauma

○ Trauma is extreme stress that overwhelms the person's ability to cope

- Threat to life
- Threat of bodily harm
- Threat of sanity

○ A person may feel overwhelmed physically, emotionally and/or mentally.

Sources of Significant Trauma

- Military combat
- Violent personal assault
- Childhood physical or sexual abuse
- Being kidnapped
- Being taken hostage
- Terrorist attacks
- Being tortured
- Being a prisoner of war
- Severe natural or manmade disasters
- Severe accidents
- Being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness
- Domestic violence

One person's trauma is not another's

How Common is PTSD?

- 60% of men and 50% of women experience at least 1 trauma
- About 8% of adults in the U.S. have PTSD
- Women are more than twice as likely as men to have PTSD at some point in their lives
- 1 in 5 service members who return from operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have symptoms of posttraumatic stress or depression

What is PTSD?

- A diagnosis with specific criteria.
 - A traumatic event occurred.
 - Experienced or witnessed actual or threatened death, serious injury or threat to personal safety
 - Felt intense fear or helplessness

- A normal response to an abnormal reaction
 - Symptoms are really “adaptations”

- A reaction to fear, not a reaction to being angry or aggressive.

Features and Symptoms of PTSD

- Reliving the event
 - Bad memories or thoughts, nightmares, flashbacks

- Avoiding situations that are reminders of the event
 - Avoiding people or situations
 - Avoiding talking about the event

Features and Symptoms of PTSD

- Negative changes in beliefs and feelings
 - Feeling fear, guilt, shame or impending doom
 - Lost of interest in activities

- Feeling keyed up
 - Jittery, on alert, easily startled
 - Difficulty concentrating or sleeping

Other Issues Associated with PTSD

- Depression, anxiety and substance abuse
- Increased rates of unemployment, divorce, separation, and spousal abuse
- Physical symptoms and possible changes in brain structure and activity

The Course of PTSD

- Longer than 1 month and may last for months or years
- Symptoms may develop immediately or they may emerge months or years after the trauma
- Symptoms may arise suddenly or gradually over time
- There is often an ebb and flow of symptoms

Risk and Resiliency Factors

Risk Factors

- Being injured during the event
- Seeing others hurt or killed
- Feelings of horror, helplessness or extreme fear
- Having little or no social support after the event
- Presence of extra stress after the event, (loss of a loved one, pain, injury, loss of job or home)
- History of mental illness

Resiliency Factors

- Having a good support network before the event
- Seeking out support from family and friends
- Finding a support group after the event
- Feeling good about one's own actions in the face of danger
- Having a coping strategy
- Being able to act and respond effectively despite feeling fear

Treatment Options

○ Psychotherapy

○ Medication

- Helps control symptoms like sadness, worry, anger and feeling numb
- Some people may experience side effects
- Does not have to be permanent

Myths about PTSD

“Only Veterans have PTSD”

FACT: Half of all women and men experience trauma. 8% of Americans have PTSD at any given time.

Myths about PTSD

“People with PTSD are violent and unpredictable”

FACT: The presence of PTSD does not make someone more prone to violence. Factors to consider are:

- Alcohol/drug misuse
- Past criminal history
- Having witnessed family violence
- High anger/irritability

Myths about PTSD

People with PTSD will never recover or if they do, they will never be “right.”

FACT: Most people with PTSD recover and many recover completely and live happy and productive lives.

Facts about PTSD in the Workplace

- Many symptoms of PTSD *can* interfere with performance and conduct at the workplace.
- Not everyone with PTSD will experience problems at work.
- Employment is an important part of recovery for people with PTSD.

What you can do

- Treat others with respect and avoid labeling people
- Understand not everyone with PTSD needs assistance.
- Treat each person as an individual and ask what will make him or her most comfortable and respect his or her needs.
- Be tolerant if the person repeats his or her stories and experiences and avoid interrupting.
- In a crisis, remain calm and be supportive.

Other ways to help

- Listen to the individual.
- Don't be afraid if you don't know what to do. Just ask
- Realize accommodations are not “special treatment”
- Be mindful that symptoms may fluctuate and are influenced by many factors.
- Support, patience and understanding will go a long way; do be generous with these.
- Consider calling the EAP for assistance.

Reviewing What We've Learned

Let's now see what we've learned by discussing two scenarios that may involve an co-worker with PTSD.

Scenario 1

You are talking with a co-worker who shows no sign of disability and she mentions that she recently spent several months rehabilitating from a horrific car accident. How do you respond?

Scenario 1

- A. Immediately ask if she has PTSD because you know this must have been the result of the accident, and you need to know if you have to be careful around her now.
- B. You realize she may have a hidden disability and you need to be sure to let all your other co-workers know.
- C. Continue with the conversation. Recognize that she may not have PTSD. If she talks about having a hard time and you are comfortable, ask her if there is anything you can do to help.
- D. You stop the conversation, explaining to your coworker that she should immediately seek psychological help.

Scenario 2

One of your coworkers has been deployed overseas for the past year. He is expected to return to work shortly and you and your coworkers are nervous about how he has been affected. You hear talk about PTSD, anger and depression issues. What should you say when your coworker returns?

Scenario 2

- A. You remember that not every Veteran returns home with disabilities. Relay this information to your fellow employees if they bring up concerns.
- B. You throw a welcome home party so you and your coworkers can see the Veteran is normal and he can tell his stories to everyone with questions.
- C. Treat the Veteran as you would any other coworker that came back after a long hiatus. You may choose to help the veteran get acclimated to any changes the workplace has made in the past year or new procedures, if they ask.
- D. You try to talk in low voices while he is in ear shot, never to approach him from behind and especially not to engage him in any discussion about what happened in military combat.
- E. A and C

Summary

- PTSD can occur after a person experiences or witnesses an extremely traumatic event.
- PTSD is treatable through medication and/or psychotherapy.
- Many people with PTSD will not show any signs of problems at work. For those that do, EAP is available to assist.

Additional Resources

- National Center for PTSD:
www.ptsd.va.gov
- National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov
- National Alliance on Mental Illness
www.nami.org
- Job Accommodation Network
www.askjan.org

The Employee Assistance Program

Call EAP Consultants at
800-869-0276

Or visit the EAP website at
www.eapconsultants.com

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