

What You Need To Know About Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome

What is PTSD?

June is PTSD Awareness Month. PTSD stands for post-traumatic stress disorder, a term which originated in the 1970s as a descriptor for impacted veterans returning from the Vietnam War and which was officially recognized as a mental health diagnosis by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 1980.

The APA defines PTSD as “a psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault.”

In decades’ past, PTSD was known as “shell shock” or “battle fatigue.” Post-traumatic stress disorder is arguably a more inclusive term, as those previous designations refer explicitly to warfare/combat, whereas we now know that PTSD can affect both soldiers and civilians.

While the term PTSD/post-traumatic stress disorder is relatively young, the conditions under which we categorize PTSD – including trauma-related emotional distress, flashbacks, nightmares, feelings of isolation and aloneness, difficulty sleeping, difficulty focusing, and several other symptoms – have been around for centuries. Even records from ancient times make note of such symptoms. Like depression, PTSD is as old as human civilization itself. So long has there been conflict and tragedy among groups of humans, there has been a risk for trauma-related stress and negative coping.



What about secondary trauma?

Secondary trauma refers to the emotional stress caused by listening to someone else’s traumatic experiences. Those of us who work in human services (counselors, nurses, social workers, other types of care professions) are especially at risk for secondary trauma. Secondary trauma is also a risk for friends and family members of those who have experienced something traumatic. They, too, can be impacted by the trauma and can struggle with the same kinds of issues affecting the person who experienced the trauma directly.

What We Need After Experiencing a Trauma

We need support

Initially after a trauma, we may be in shock, and most of us will automatically just say "I'm fine" even when we aren't. But if we need additional support, it is critical that we ask for and accept help when it is offered.

We need to feel safe

When we experience or witness any kind of traumatic event, our reactions are likely to be intensified. We need to be prepared to discuss and address this, and the best way to address this is in a safe and open environment that promotes honest discussion and sharing.

We need to be heard

We might be most comfortable processing our reactions to trauma with a close loved one – a spouse, a sibling, maybe a best friend. But sometimes those closest to us find it difficult to listen, or may not be able to empathize in the way we need them to. This is where counseling can be of tremendous benefit.

Symptoms of PTSD

