

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Making a Difference Today

You've just witnessed a crime or a terrorist attack. Over time you expect the memories will fade, but instead they linger. And linger, perhaps even intensifying.

Experiencing or witnessing a crime, battle, or terrorist attack, or being a victim of sexual abuse, can lead to a form of stress that can last a lifetime. Termed post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, the condition afflicts 5.2 million Americans aged 18 to 54 each year. Its social and economic costs can be devastating. Almost half the Vietnam veterans with PTSD have been arrested or jailed. Civilians who suffer from the disorder miss not only work days but also the chance to lead full lives.

With the ongoing war on terror, the incidence of PTSD is rising, according to some studies. PTSD-like symptoms doubled among New York City residents after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. And PTSD can affect homeland security in ways that are only now being uncovered. Some emergency personnel and soldiers who develop PTSD after a trauma may react so strongly to future traumas that they cannot help other victims of disaster or serve effectively in battle.

Until recently, those who survived or witnessed trauma were left with flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, and memory problems that often lasted their whole lives. But new research is finding ways to head off the long-lasting effects of PTSD.

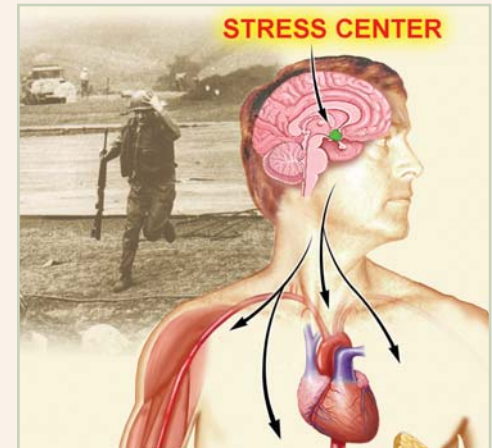
PTSD is a Serious Brain Disorder

For years it was thought that those who survived or witnessed a trauma should be able to tough it out and move on. But scientific studies funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) helped reveal that PTSD is a serious brain disorder with biological underpinnings. For example, scientists determined that the part of the brain involved in learning, memory, and emotion appears to be smaller in people with PTSD and that levels of some brain chemicals are altered. These changes are believed to be caused by increased stress hormones from a traumatic event and by the constant reliving of the event.

Research Brings New Treatments

New understanding of the disorder paved the way for use of so-called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors in treating PTSD. Studies funded by NIH found that these drugs ease the symptoms of depression and anxiety. They are the only agents currently approved for treating the symptoms of PTSD. Talking with a counselor or therapist can also help PTSD victims to cope.

Thanks to the identification of PTSD as a true brain disorder, more and more people are going to their physicians for help rather than trying to battle their severe stress alone. With continued research into the biological basis of PTSD, physicians will have a greater range of targeted treatments to help them.



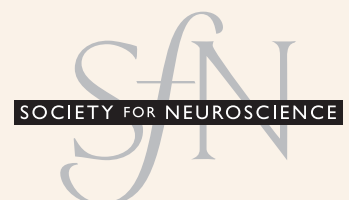
The body's response to stress normally provides the extra strength and energy needed to cope. But stress that lasts for a long time, as in PTSD, repeatedly elevates the body's stress response, wreaking havoc on the brain and other parts of the body.

Continued funding for research could lead to:

- Improved pharmacological agents that target the underlying biology of PTSD.
- Better use of drugs and therapy in concert that can maximize the benefits of both and reduce the costs of care.
- Treatments to prevent the onset of PTSD after a trauma.

For more information please email brss@sfn.org.

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Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Making a Difference Tomorrow

Health-care practitioners today are better able than ever to help those who have suffered a traumatic event to cope, thanks to research over the past 20 years. Yet much remains to be done. Did you know that:

- Some 5.2 million Americans 18 to 54 have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) every year. Statistics are not available for those younger or older.
- About 30 percent of Vietnam veterans and 8 percent of Gulf War veterans developed PTSD.
- Eight percent of men and 20 percent of women exposed to a traumatic event develop PTSD.
- Twice as many people in the New York City metropolitan area had PTSD after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, compared with the nation as a whole.
- Of those who lived far from the World Trade Center and Pentagon, 44 percent also had stress symptoms.

With continued NIH funding, basic and clinical research will find better ways to help those who have suffered a trauma to cope.

Research Equals New Treatments

NIH-funded studies on the brain chemicals and structures altered in PTSD offer particular hope for developing effective treatments. One approach is to target corticotropin-releasing factor (CRF), a brain chemical that plays a crucial role in coordinating the body's response to stress.

And NIH-funded studies showed that drugs called selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors improved the memory of patients with PTSD and reduced shrinkage of brain tissue in the part of the brain involved in memory and emotion, helping PTSD patients better deal with traumatic memories.

Better Prevention

Reducing exposure to traumatic stress would be the best way to prevent it. Yet traumatic stress is often unanticipated and difficult to control. So scientists are studying ways to prevent the onset of PTSD after a trauma. Compounds called beta-adrenergic blockers are under intense study for their ability to prevent PTSD victims from becoming excessively startled when they are exposed to situations reminiscent of the original trauma.

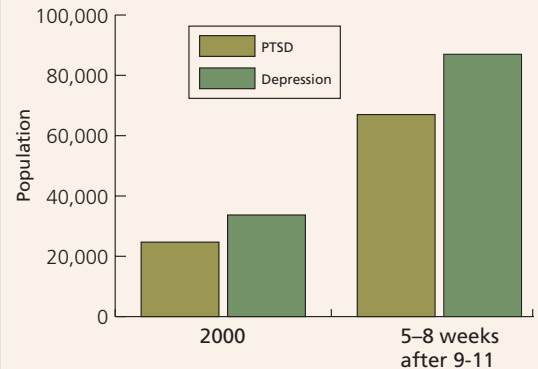
Another way to prevent PTSD may be to identify those most likely to develop it and keep them out of high-stress situations. Scientists showed in one study that early experiences help predict how an individual responds to stress later in life. Military personnel who had been sexually abused as children were four times more likely to develop PTSD after combat.

With continued support, research will help lessen the economic and social costs of PTSD and better prepare our nation to respond effectively to the continuing war on terror.

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Prevalence of PTSD and Depression in New Yorkers after September 11, 2001



PTSD doubled among adults living south of 110th St. in Manhattan after September 11, 2001. As America faces the ongoing threat of terrorism, the incidence of PTSD is likely to rise.

Already research has led to:

- The identification of PTSD as a true biological disorder.
- The use of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors to treat PTSD.
- Better understanding of the effects of long-term stress on the brain.