



KAISER PERMANENTE®

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder is a psychiatric disorder that may affect people who have survived or witnessed a terrifying, overwhelming trauma. Examples of such traumatic events include rape or sexual abuse, a robbery or kidnapping, a fire or flood, a car or airplane crash, a riot or bombing, or a shooting. Although any number of different traumas besides these can lead to the disorder, the response to the traumatic event is similar.

People who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder may experience incapacitating flashbacks, nightmares, anxiety, or depression. They may reexperience their trauma by having bothersome, recurrent recollections or distressful, repeated nightmares about it. They may also experience sleep disturbances, irritability, difficulty concentrating, hypervigilance (or always being "on guard"), or an exaggerated startle response. For example, a survivor of a shooting spree may "hit the dirt" and cover his head when he hears a car backfire.

People suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder may become immediately distressed when they are exposed to situations or conditions that resemble or remind them of their trauma in some way. For instance, a woman who was sexually abused during wintertime may get depressed when it turns cold; or a veteran may get angry and hostile each year on Memorial Day. Consequently, many victims may try to avoid anything associated with their traumatic event.

The chances of developing post-traumatic stress disorder are as random as the chances of experiencing a disaster. The illness can develop in any person of any age who survives or witnesses a horrifying event. The symptoms can begin to appear anytime—from days to months to even years after the traumatic event. Since everyone is affected differently by a trauma, one person may develop symptoms after surviving an earthquake, while his or her neighbor has no problem coping with the disaster.

If you think you're suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, seek help by calling the Psychiatry Department at your local Kaiser Permanente facility. Generally, most people benefit from individual, family, or group therapy. Let's briefly discuss each one of these:

- By talking one-on-one with a trained psychotherapist, you can better understand the problem and its effect on your daily life and relationships. You can also learn better coping mechanisms and alternative ways of responding to stress.
- Because family members may be affected, family therapy can also be extremely helpful. By working together, family members can learn to understand the illness and improve their communication with one another.
- Finally, group therapy can also be very therapeutic. Survivors of trauma can meet together to

share their experiences and feelings. They realize they are not alone and are able to provide support and feedback for one another.



For information about stress and anxiety, please refer to your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*. You might also want to listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone messages on Panic Attacks; Phobias; Stress; Hyperventilation; or Depression. Please check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthphone Directory*.

For additional health information you can trust:

- Log on to our members-only Web site at www.kaiserpermanente.org/california, then click the "Kaiser Permanente Members Only" button
- Visit your local Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center
- Check your Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone messages at 1-800-33 ASK ME (1-800-332-7563)

To get your free Handbook and Healthphone Directory, call 1-800-464-4000.

The information presented here is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of professional medical care. If you have persistent health problems or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor or other health care professional.

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REGIONAL HEALTH EDUCATION