

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Marian returned home to New Jersey 6 months ago after spending 17 months in Iraq, where she was in combat for her entire tour. For the past few months, Marian has been experiencing violent nightmares and flashbacks in which she remembers a horrific incident during her time in Iraq when her best friend lost both of her legs in combat. She avoids watching the news and talking to other veterans. Marian frequently has angry outbursts and feels “on edge”. She has had difficulties holding down jobs and maintaining old friendships.

John was involved in a terrible car accident 5 years ago while he was driving down the Turnpike on his way to work. He broke both of his feet and needed several stitches all over his body. Although his physical injuries have healed, John still constantly thinks about his car accident and has nightmares during which he is being burned alive in a trapped vehicle. Furthermore, John has never driven since the incident and refuses to get on the highway even as a passenger. Whenever he sees a car driving on the highway during a car commercial, he starts to hyperventilate and sweat profusely. Friends and family have also noticed that John tends to be unnecessarily tense and angry with them during regular conversation.

Someone with **post-traumatic stress disorder** may have experiences like the ones above.

According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness, “when people experience or witness a traumatic event such as abuse, a natural disaster, or extreme violence, it is normal to be distressed and to feel “on edge” for some time after this experience. Some people who experience traumatic events have severe symptoms such as nightmares, flashbacks, being very easily startled or scared, or feeling numb/angry/irritable/distracted. Sometimes these symptoms last for weeks or even months after the event and are so severe that they make it difficult for a person to work, have loving relationships, or “return to normal.” This is when a person may be suffering from PTSD.”¹

According to the National Institute for Mental Health, the symptoms of PTSD can be grouped into three categories:

1. Re-experiencing symptoms

- Flashbacks—reliving the trauma over and over, including physical symptoms like a racing heart or sweating
- Bad dreams
- Frightening thoughts²

2. Avoidance symptoms

- Staying away from places, events, or objects that are reminders of the experience
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Feeling strong guilt, depression, or worry
- Losing interest in activities that were enjoyable in the past
- Having trouble remembering the dangerous event²

3. Hyperarousal symptoms

- Being easily startled
- Feeling tense or “on edge”
- Having difficulty sleeping, and/or having angry outbursts²

If a person experiences these symptoms for only a few weeks, he or she may have acute stress disorder, or ASD. Symptoms lasting longer than a few weeks might indicate PTSD.

Bibliography

¹ Duckworth, Ken, and Jacob Freedman. National Alliance on Mental Illness, "Anxiety Disorders." Last modified April 2012. Accessed July 25, 2013. http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=By_Illness&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=142543.

² The National Institute of Mental Health, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)." Accessed July 26, 2013. <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml>.
