

An estimated 70% of adults in the United States have experienced a traumatic event at least once in their lives, and up to 20% of these individuals go on to develop post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD. An estimated 5% of Americans—more than 13 million people—have PTSD at any given time. These rates are the highest among individuals with particularly traumatic life experiences, including those who have a job that increases exposure risk to traumatic events, such as first responders and military personnel. There are 600,000 unique ways that PTSD can show up, so comparing yourself to others is not always helpful.

PTSD does not just go away, and left untreated, it can have a detrimental effect on a person's life, increasing their chances of developing other mental health disorders or medical problems. However, support is available and the first step is recognizing the symptoms. Below are the diagnostic criteria for PTSD¹ as outlined in the DSM-5²:

Criterion A: Stressor (one required)

The person was exposed to death, threatened death, or actual/threatened serious injury, or actual/threatened sexual violence:

- ✓ Direct exposure
- ✓ Witnessing the trauma
- ✓ Learning that a relative or close friend was exposed to a trauma.
- ✓ Indirect exposure to aversive details of trauma, usually in the course of professional duties. (i.e., first responders)

Criterion B: Intrusion Symptoms (one required)

- ✓ Unwanted, upsetting memories
- ✓ Nightmares
- ✓ Flashbacks
- ✓ Emotional distress after exposure to traumatic reminders
- ✓ Physical reactivity after exposure to traumatic reminders

Criterion C: Avoidance (one required)

- ✓ Avoidance of trauma-related thoughts or feelings
- ✓ Avoidance of trauma-related external reminders

Criterion D: Negative alterations in cognition and mood (two required)

Negative thoughts or feelings:

- ✓ Inability to recall key features of trauma
- ✓ Overly negative thoughts and assumptions about others, self and the world
- ✓ Exaggerated blame of self or others for causing trauma
- ✓ Negative emotional state (i.e., anger, fear, guilt, shame)
- ✓ Decreased interest/participation in activities
- ✓ Feeling isolated/misunderstood, or others can't relate
- ✓ Difficulty experiencing positive feelings

Criterion E: Alterations in arousal and reactivity (two required)

- ✓ Irritability or aggression (physical or verbal)
- ✓ Risky or self-destructive behavior
- ✓ Hypervigilance
- ✓ Heightened startle reaction
- ✓ Difficulty concentrating
- ✓ Difficulty with sleep (falling asleep, staying asleep, restless sleep, quality sleep)

Criterion F: (required) Symptoms last for more than one month.

Criterion G: (required) Symptoms create distress or functional impairment.

Criterion H: (required) Symptoms are not due to medication, substance abuse, or other illness.

¹ Any mental health diagnosis must be rendered by a licensed, qualified professional.

² American Psychiatric Association (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.).