

## PTSD, Trauma and Addiction

Studies of the connection between traumatic experiences and addiction estimate that anywhere from 36.6% to 92% of people who have experienced trauma also develop an addiction. The Veterans Administration (VA) has surveyed people seeking treatment from the VA and found that 74% of Vietnam-era veterans had co-occurring post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and addiction and 63% of veterans from Operations Enduring Freedom/Iraqi Freedom/New Dawn had co-occurring disorders. Unfortunately, other than the VA data, most studies of co-occurring PTSD and addiction were conducted 20 to 30 years ago.

There are several kinds of trauma. Situational trauma occurs because of a specific or discrete event, such as being in combat during war, being physically or sexually abused or assaulted either as a child or an adult, a terrorist attack, serious accidents such as a car wreck, natural disasters such as a fire, tornado, hurricane, flood, or earthquake. During a traumatic event, you think that your life or others' lives are in danger. You may feel afraid or feel that you have no control over what is happening around you. Cumulative trauma is subtle and the feelings build over time. Examples of cumulative trauma are racism, poverty, religious persecution, or sexism. Intergenerational, transgenerational, or historical trauma refers to cumulative emotional and psychological wounding extending over an individual's lifespan and is also transferred across generations. Examples of intergenerational trauma are the Holocaust, Native American "Long Walks", or Japanese American internment. If trauma is not dealt with adequately in one generation, it often is passed down unwittingly in parental behaviors and thought systems.

Responses to the traumas may include substance abuse and often includes other types of self-destructive behavior, such as suicidal thoughts and gestures, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, anger, and difficulty recognizing and expressing emotions. Unresolved grief often accompanies the trauma. Children may absorb parents' psychic burdens by observing their parents' feelings and behavior and from hearing stories of their trauma. The children imagine unspeakable abuse and losses from parental anxiety or harshness of tone or clinginess—parents whose own families have been destroyed may be unwilling to let their children grow up and leave them.

Children whose parents are survivors of trauma may be born less able to metabolize stress. They may be born more susceptible to PTSD which is a vulnerability expressed in their molecules, neurons, cells, and genes. There has not been enough research to definitively prove a genetic link, but small studies indicate that a change may occur during pregnancy that changes the gene cells of the unborn child. This would explain why some people who are exposed to the same traumatic event develop PTSD and some don't.

### What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder?

Most people have some stress-related reactions after a traumatic event; but not everyone develops PTSD. If your reactions don't go away over time and they disrupt your life, you may have PTSD.

Symptoms of PTSD include:

- Reliving the event. You may have bad memories or nightmares. You even may feel like you are going through the event again. This is called a flashback.

- Avoiding situations that remind you of the event. You may try to avoid situations or people that trigger memories of the traumatic event. You may even avoid talking or thinking about the event.
- Negative changes in beliefs and feelings. The way you think about yourself and others may change because of the trauma. You may feel fear, guilt, or shame. Or you may not be interested in activities you used to enjoy. This is another way to avoid memories.
- Feeling jumpy. You may be jittery, or always alert and on the lookout for danger. Or, you may have trouble concentrating or sleeping. This is known as hyperarousal.

While PTSD is a serious mental health problem, it doesn't have to influence your life forever. There are effective treatments and medications to help people recover from traumatic events.

#### **Treatments for PTSD include:**

- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is the most effective treatment for PTSD. There are different types of CBT, such as cognitive therapy, where you learn skills to understand how trauma changed your thoughts and feelings.
- A similar kind of therapy is called Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), which involves focusing on sounds or hand movements while you talk about the trauma.
- Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), also called "tapping", stops the fight-or-flight response and reprograms the brain and body to act and react differently.
- Guided Imagery is a program of directed thoughts and suggestions that guide your imagination toward a relaxed, focused state.
- Comprehensive Resource Model can be useful for some people for whom other treatment models have not worked.

#### **Medications for PTSD**

Medications can be effective too. A type of drug known as a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), which is also used for depression, is effective for PTSD. Another medication called Prazosin has been found to be helpful in decreasing nightmares related to the trauma.

As with all mental health problems, if you think you may be suffering from PTSD, seek help from a mental health professional. Counseling and, if necessary, medication can relieve the symptoms of PTSD and help you to heal from the trauma.