Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

What is it?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental condition that can result from being in or seeing a traumatic or terrifying event. These events can include combat, a terrorist attack, a natural disaster, a serious accident, an assault, or a rape. If you have PTSD, you may often relive the experience in nightmares or flashbacks. These are clear and frightening memories of the event. You may also have trouble sleeping.

PTSD affects people in very different ways. It can interfere with daily activities such as work or school, and it can make you withdraw from friends or loved ones.

Follow-up care is a key part of your treatment and safety. Be sure to make and go to all appointments, and call your doctor if you are having problems. It's also a good idea to know your test results and keep a list of the medicines you take.

How can you care for yourself at home?

• Take medicines exactly as directed. Call your doctor if you think you are having a problem with your medicine.
• Go to your counseling sessions and follow-up appointments.
• Recognize and accept your anxiety. Then, when you are in a situation that makes you anxious, say to yourself, "This is not an emergency. I feel uncomfortable, but I am not in danger. I can keep going even if I feel anxious."
• Be kind to your body:
  o Relieve tension with exercise or a massage.
  o Get enough rest.
  o Avoid alcohol, caffeine, nicotine, and illegal drugs. They can increase your anxiety level and cause sleep problems.
  o Learn and do relaxation techniques. See below for more about these techniques.
• Engage your mind. Get out and do something you enjoy. Go to a funny movie, or take a walk or hike. Plan your day. Having too much or too little to do can make you anxious.
O Keep a record of your symptoms. Discuss your fears with a good friend or family member, or join a support group for people with similar problems. Talking to others sometimes relieves stress.
O Get involved in social groups, or volunteer to help others. Being alone sometimes makes things seem worse than they are.
O Get at least 30 minutes of exercise on most days of the week. Walking is a good choice. You also may want to do other activities, such as running, swimming, cycling, or playing tennis or team sports.

Relaxation techniques

Do relaxation exercises 10 to 20 minutes a day. You can play soothing, relaxing music while you do them, if you wish.
- Tell others in your house that you are going to do your relaxation exercises. Ask them not to disturb you.
- Find a comfortable, quiet place.
- Lie down on your back, or sit with your back straight.
- Focus on your breathing. Make it slow and steady.
- Breathe in through your nose. Breathe out through either your nose or mouth.
- Breathe deeply, filling up the area between your navel and your rib cage. Breathe so that your belly goes up and down.
- Do not hold your breath.
- Breathe like this for 5 to 10 minutes. Notice the feeling of calmness throughout your whole body.

As you continue to breathe slowly and deeply, relax by doing these next steps for another 5 to 10 minutes:
- Tighten and relax each muscle group in your body. Start at your toes, and work your way up to your head.
- Imagine your muscle groups relaxing and getting heavy.
- Empty your mind of all thoughts.
- Let yourself relax more and more deeply.
- Be aware of the state of calmness that surrounds you.
- When your relaxation time is over, you can bring yourself back to alertness by moving your fingers and toes. Then move your hands and feet. And then move your entire body. Sometimes people fall asleep during relaxation. But they most often wake up soon.
- Always give yourself time to return to full alertness before you drive a car. Wait to do anything that might cause an accident if you are not fully alert. Never play a relaxation tape while you drive a car.
**When should you call for help?**

Call **911** anytime you think you may need emergency care. For example, call if:

- You feel you cannot stop from hurting yourself or someone else.

Watch closely for changes in your health, and be sure to contact your doctor if:

- Your PTSD symptoms are getting worse.
- You have new or worsening symptoms of anxiety.
- You are not getting better as expected.

For more information go to:

- [kp.org/santaclara/bhc](http://kp.org/santaclara/bhc)
- [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder | Topic Overview](http://kp.org/santaclara/bhc)

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