

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and COVID-19



What is PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health disorder that can develop in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic or life-threatening event. These events can include accidents, natural disasters, surgeries, death, crimes, military combat, child abuse, neglect, and urban or domestic violence. PTSD impacts nearly 10% of Canadians at some point in their lifetime.¹

Who is at risk of developing PTSD?

Those individuals who work in occupations where they are repeatedly exposed to trauma under high levels of stress are at particular risk; however, PTSD can develop in anyone.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created stressors that can impact people with existing PTSD and may lead to PTSD in healthcare and long-term care workers, front line essential workers and COVID-19 survivors.

Individuals with pre-existing mental illnesses live a purposefully balanced lifestyle with coping strategies built around challenges they encounter in everyday life. The pandemic may have disrupted those strategies, routines and support systems.²

While the vaccination efforts against COVID-19 are well underway across the country, and we can see the light at the end of the tunnel, it's important to recognize that the aftermath of trauma can last a very long time.³

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and COVID-19

As we all continue to grapple with the major changes, economic challenges and the unknown future that the pandemic has brought about, many people are susceptible to developing PTSD.

Moral injury and PTSD

Moral injury is the psychological distress an individual encounters from actions or inactions that violate a personal moral code. It results from actions or behaviours that contravene deep personal beliefs or is experienced when conflict arises from the immoral or unethical behaviour of others. While not considered a mental health disorder, it can lead to the development of depression, anxiety and PTSD. Moral injury is not limited to only front-line workers (e.g., healthcare providers, first responders), but also in other essential roles, such as social workers, prison staff, education workers, grocery store workers, delivery drivers, and journalists.⁴

People who have lost family members to COVID-19 may feel like they could have done something to prevent the death from occurring, or done something more and may experience moral injury leading to PTSD.

The feeling of betrayal from leaders or trusted others⁴, extended periods of isolation coupled with continued feelings of helplessness and confusion, may lead to moral injury and subsequently to PTSD.

How can I support someone with moral injury?

If you feel you are suffering from moral injury, or you are concerned that a family member, friend or colleague is suffering from moral injury, seek or provide support. Peer support is helpful and can be protective for mental health⁴, easing feelings of isolation. You may also suggest the individual seek professional support early on.

COVID-19 survivors and PTSD

A small study from earlier this year in Rome, found that PTSD occurred in 30% of patients after recovery from severe COVID-19 infection.⁵ This is in line with other studies examining PTSD after other coronavirus infections, such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). Seeking support from family and friends as well as receiving mental health services upon recovery from severe infection is advised to prevent PTSD from developing.

What are the signs and symptoms of PTSD?

Since PTSD can affect people differently, it's important to be aware of the signs and symptoms, and to provide support to coworkers, family members and friends if these signs are observed. If you are experiencing these symptoms, seek support.

Symptoms fall into four categories:⁶

- **Avoidance and numbing.** This includes avoiding situations, locations, events, objects or people that are reminders of the traumatic event. This may also include avoiding thoughts and feelings related to the traumatic event.
- **Intrusive memories.** These memories can occur as nightmares, dreams, flashbacks or frightening thoughts that may affect daily routines.
- **Physical and emotional reactions.** This can include having angry outbursts, having difficulty sleeping, feeling on edge, being easily startled, being easily frustrated or irritable. These reactions can affect daily tasks.
- **Negative thoughts and mood changes.** This can include trouble recalling features of the traumatic event, negative thoughts about oneself or others in the world, loss of interest in enjoyable activities, and unnatural feelings of guilt, blame or hopelessness. These symptoms can become progressively worse and can cause difficulties maintaining close relationships and detaching from family and friends.



How can I support family, friends or colleagues if they have been diagnosed with PTSD or are at risk for developing PTSD?

While everyone across the globe has been living through the same pandemic, it hasn't affected everyone in the same way. Everyone will experience different emotions at different times. If a family member or close friend is diagnosed with PTSD, it can be overwhelming and difficult to understand the accompanying changes in their behavior.

Strategies to support those with PTSD or at risk of developing PTSD include:⁷

- Educate yourself on PTSD,
- Keep the lines of communication open,
- Be a good listener,
- Ask how you can help your colleague, friend or family member,
- Plan regular activities that you know your colleague, friend or family member enjoys (virtual book club, virtual dinners, socially distanced hikes, etc.),
- Build a support system of trusted colleagues, family and friends, and
- Avoid pressuring the individual to speak about their experiences, trivialize their experience or offer advice unless you're asked.

Evidence-based trauma-focused psychotherapies may be needed. Seek the help of a professional who can help the individual regain a healthy perspective and cope with COVID-19 related trauma.

How can I build resiliency to help prevent moral injury or PTSD?

There are ways to cope with the overwhelming feelings that can lead to moral injury and subsequently PTSD during, and also after the pandemic is over. Try building these practices into your daily life⁷:

- Take care of your body by eating well, staying hydrated and exercising,
- Get good sleep,
- Connect with people for social support,
- Spend time outdoors,
- Take regular breaks,
- Maintain a regular schedule,
- Limit time spent watching the news,
- Think about strategies that have been successful for you in the past when dealing with a stressful situation, and
- Seek professional help if you feel that the above measures are not enough.

During difficult times, it's important to surround yourself with people who you can depend on. These are the people you can count on for support, love and understanding.

References:

1. Van Ameringen, M., C. Mancini, B. Patterson and M.H. Boyle. (2008) Post-traumatic stress disorder in Canada. *CNS Neuroscience and Therapeutics*. 14(3): 171-181.
2. Esterwood, E. and S.A. Saeed. (2020) Past epidemics, natural disasters, COVID19, and mental health: learning from history as we deal with the present and prepare for the future. *Psychiatric Quarterly*. 91:1121-1133.
3. Kleber, R.J. (2019) Trauma and public mental health: a focused review. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*. Retrieved on April 5, 2021 from <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsy.2019.00451/full>
4. Williamson, V., D. Murphy and N. Greenberg. (2020) COVID-19 and experiences of moral injury in frontline key workers. *Occupational Medicine*. 70(5): 317-319.
5. Janiri, D., et al. (2021) Posttraumatic stress disorder in patients after severe COVID-19 infection. *JAMA Psychiatry*. Retrieved on April 9, 2021 from <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/2776722>
6. The Mayo Clinic. (n.d.) Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Retrieved on April 1, 2021 from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20355967>
7. UCL News (20 April 2020) Helping Healthcare workers to cope with stress. Retrieved on April 9 2021 from <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/2020/apr/helping-healthcare-workers-cope-stress>

