

# Understanding PTSD

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) develops when a person experiences or witnesses a scary, shocking, terrifying, or dangerous event. These stressful or traumatic events usually involve a situation in which someone's life has been threatened or severe injury has occurred. The immediate feeling may be fear, terror, or helplessness.

PTSD makes you feel stressed and anxious, even when you are not in danger. To be considered for PTSD, your signs and symptoms must last more than a month and be severe enough to interfere with school, work, or relationships. Beyond firefighting, PTSD can be caused by a number of things like war, a natural disaster, sexual assault, physical abuse, or a bad accident.

While many firefighters experience PTSD, it is important to remember that each person's experience and risk for the disorder is unique. PTSD starts at different times for different people. One firefighter may work through many difficult events over several years before showing PTSD symptoms. Another may develop symptoms after only one disturbing event – and many firefighters never develop PTSD.

## Why Is It an Issue for Firefighters?

PTSD is an issue for firefighters because the nature of the work may expose you to a variety of traumatic and dangerous situations.

The numbers don't lie. There is an increased risk for the disorder if you are a firefighter. Approximately 20% of first responders meet the criteria for PTSD at some point during their career, compared with a 6.8% lifetime risk for the general population.

Fire departments across the country are improving when it comes to supporting firefighters who face issues like PTSD. However, many firefighters still don't feel comfortable talking openly about their struggles. One study found that 58% of firefighters reported stigma-related barriers when seeking professional help for suicidal thoughts. The same struggle is most likely true for those with PTSD.

## RESOURCES

### International Association of Fire Fighters

[www.iaff.org/behavioral-health/](http://www.iaff.org/behavioral-health/)

### Firefighter Behavioral Health Alliance

[www.ffbha.org/](http://www.ffbha.org/)

### American Psychological Association

[www.apa.org/topics/ptsd](http://www.apa.org/topics/ptsd)

*in the know*

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# PTSD FOR FIREFIGHTERS

**From Surviving to Thriving**

# Knowing the Signs

## Common signs of PTSD include:

- Flashbacks, or feeling like the event is happening again
- Trouble sleeping or nightmares
- Feeling alone or detached from others
- Losing interest in activities
- Having angry outbursts or other extreme reactions
- Feeling worried, guilty, or sad
- Frightening thoughts
- Having trouble concentrating or remembering
- Having physical pain like headaches or stomach aches
- Avoidance of memories, thoughts, or feelings associated with traumatic events
- Negative beliefs about yourself or others
- Irritability or startling easily

## What's at Stake?

PTSD makes it hard to do everyday things, which puts a strain on connections with friends, family, and colleagues. PTSD increases the likelihood of divorce or the end of an intimate partnership because it can cause difficulties in communication, intimacy, and overall relationship satisfaction. Some research shows that children of those with PTSD are more likely to have problems with behavior, school, and getting along with others. Children may have PTSD symptoms related to watching their parent's symptoms. On a professional level, PTSD can lead to behavioral issues and strained relationships that make it hard for you to advance in your career.

## How to Help Yourself

- Talk with your health care provider about treatment options and follow your treatment plan.
- Engage in exercise, mindfulness, or other activities that help reduce stress.
- Try to maintain routines for meals, exercise, and sleep.
- Set realistic goals and focus on what you can manage.
- Spend time with trusted friends or relatives, and tell them about things that may trigger symptoms.
- Expect your symptoms to improve gradually, not immediately.
- Avoid using alcohol or other drugs.
- [www.findtreatment.gov](http://www.findtreatment.gov) is a confidential and anonymous resource for people seeking treatment options.

## How to Help Others

If you know someone who may be experiencing PTSD, the most important thing you can do is to help that person get the right diagnosis and treatment. Some people may need help making an appointment with their health care provider; others may benefit from having someone accompany them to their health care visits.

If a close friend or relative is diagnosed with PTSD, you can encourage them to follow their treatment plan. If their symptoms do not get better after 6 to 8 weeks, you can encourage them to talk to their health care provider.