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Living/Health

Mental health minute: Recognizing PTSD and suggestions for treatment

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Do you feel on edge or more scared than usual? Are you having nightmares? Have you been avoiding things that once made you happy? If you have experienced or witnessed trauma, which can include a life-threatening incident, serious injury or sexual violence, then you may have developed post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Approximately 60 percent of men and 50 percent of women experience at least one trauma during their lifetime, and PTSD can occur when lasting effects from the trauma prevent people from returning to their normal functioning.

While there are a variety of PTSD symptoms, the most common include:

- nightmares and/or flashbacks
- avoiding things/people that remind you of the trauma
- intense and/or prolonged stress after a reminder of the event
- less interest in activities you previously enjoyed
- inability to feel positive emotions and/or increased irritability
- problems concentrating
- constant awareness of your surroundings to prevent possible harm
- being startled more easily than usual

In reaction to their symptoms, people with PTSD may heavily drink or do drugs to numb their feelings, isolate themselves from others, consider harming themselves, or work longer hours to keep distracted.

PTSD symptoms can be easily triggered by the following:

- Anything that reminds them of the trauma: sights, sounds, smells, touches, people, places or activities
- Conversations or media coverage about any type of trauma
- Situations or places that feel confining
- Arguments
- Strong emotions
- Physical discomfort, such as hunger, thirst, sickness and sexual frustration

Treatment is available for you or a loved one who may have PTSD. In many cases, PTSD develops because the trauma has not yet been processed, and therapy can help process it so that the person is able to move past the trauma. Medications can also help manage increased and persistent trauma-related anxiety.

It can be stressful if someone you care about is suffering from PTSD. Your loved one may not seem like their usual self and may instead be distant, irritable or absent-minded. Here are ways to be supportive and some common mistakes to avoid.

Do

- Be patient and educate yourself about PTSD
- Encourage them to seek treatment
- Help increase their sense of safety: create routines, minimize stress, speak about the future, keep your promises, and emphasize their strengths
- Become aware of their triggers and prevent them from occurring, if possible
- If they are ready, listen and allow them to talk about the event repeatedly (It can help them process it)
- Give them space if they need it, especially if they are angry at the moment
- Make time for your own life

Try to avoid

- Telling them it will be OK and that "the past is the past."
- Pressuring them to talk about the event
- Giving advice
- Taking over the conversation with your own experiences and feelings

- Taking their symptoms personally

For a great resource with more information related to PTSD, visit ptsd.va.gov

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