

PTSD signs and symptoms

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Potentially life-threatening medical events, like SCAD, can be very stressful and scary. It is common to have a variety of emotional reactions to extremely stressful and traumatic events, including fear, anxiety, sadness, and irritability. For most individuals, these emotional reactions will resolve and get better on their own. However, for some individuals, these symptoms can persist and cause great distress and/or interfere with one's home or work life. Some people can even develop posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after a potentially life-threatening medical event. Although we often think of PTSD as a psychological condition that affects war veterans, PTSD can also be triggered by experiencing an acute medical event.¹ Not everyone who experiences a potentially life-threatening medical event will have PTSD onset—some individuals are more likely to develop it than others. However, it has been found to affect a sizeable number of survivors of these events. For example, it has been estimated that approximately 12% of patients develop symptoms of PTSD after a heart attack.²

There are four types of symptoms of PTSD:

1) Reliving the event

These symptoms involve having memories of the traumatic event. They can come back at any time, including during the day and at night (e.g., in the form of nightmares). Sometimes, individuals can even feel like they are going through the event again (flashbacks).

2) Avoiding reminders of the event

Individuals may try to avoid situations or people that trigger memories of the traumatic event. They may also try to avoid thinking or talking about the event.

3) Negative changes in beliefs and feelings

These symptoms involve alterations in how individuals think and feel about themselves, others, and the world. For example, people may no longer experience loving feelings toward others or think that the world is a totally dangerous place.

4) Feeling keyed up

Individuals may be keyed up and on alert for danger after a traumatic event. They may startle easily (e.g., jump if there is a loud sound), have difficulty sleeping, or have trouble concentrating.

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If you have a loved one who has experienced SCAD, it can be helpful to be aware that symptoms of PTSD can develop after life-threatening cardiac events. Your loved one might become emotionally or socially withdrawn or stop doing things that he or she used to enjoy. If you notice that your loved one has symptoms like those listed above for more than four weeks or find that these symptoms are very distressing and/or disrupt your loved one's life at home or work, it is recommended that he/she seek professional help from a doctor or counselor. Some resources for finding treatment providers in your area include:

Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies "Find a CBT Therapist"

<http://www.findcbt.org/xFAT/>

International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies Clinician Directory

<http://www.istss.org/find-a-clinician.aspx>

However, not everyone is always ready to acknowledge that they need help or treatment. As long as individuals are not in danger of harming themselves or others, it is important to respect their decision about whether to seek assistance. Providing support and understanding for your loved one can be a great help in the aftermath of SCAD.

In addition to being mindful of your loved one's emotional state after SCAD, it is important to care for yourself as well. Be sure to take time for self-care, whether that is making time to talk to friends, exercise, engage in hobbies, join a support group, or talk with a mental health professional.

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References

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