

# POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

PTSD IN TEENAGERS



SHEPHERDS  
HILL ACADEMY



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# Introduction

While often associated with adults who have experienced the traumas of war, post-traumatic stress disorder (or PTSD) is also common among children and teens. PTSD is the development of certain symptoms following an event where the child or teenager was exposed to a type of trauma or traumatic event.

According to Village Behavioral Health, traumatic events can overwhelm a child's ability to cope healthily and naturally. This may leave them feeling as though the world is dangerous and out of control. Even though the memory of the traumatic event may be distant or repressed, the event deeply impacts the child's life, as well as their thoughts concerning themselves and the world.

Rather than simply recalling the traumatic event, a child or teen with PTSD will relive the event, bringing back to life the fear and pain of the trauma. Village Behavioral Health cites PTSD as having elements of intrinsic thoughts, emotional numbing, social withdraw or isolation, cognitive changes, and hyperarousal.

## What Causes Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Teenagers?

PTSD is caused when a child or teen experiences or witnesses a traumatic event in their lives. This event can be a one-time occurrence, or it can be a repetitive experience. However, one child may experience a similar traumatic event as another child, and not develop PTSD.

The severity of posttraumatic stress disorder will often vary depending on several factors:

- Severity of the Trauma
- Occurrence of the Trauma (once or repeated)
- Reaction of Parent/Caregiver to the Trauma
- Child's Proximity to the Trauma

When a teen or child experiences a traumatic event, there is the possibility that the child may develop post-traumatic stress disorder. Some factors for risk of developing PTSD include:

**Genetics.** If you or someone in your family suffers from [depression](#), PTSD, or another mental health disorder, the risks are higher that your child will develop PTSD following a traumatic situation in their life. The risk of developing PTSD will also increase if the child or teen is already suffering from depression or [anxiety](#). A teen's personality and temperament may also contribute to their resilience in developing PTSD.

**Biology.** According to Village Behavioral Health, it is suggested that the way in which a child's brain regulates hormones and chemicals in response to stress can contribute to the development of PTSD. Females are at a higher risk of developing PTSD than males.

Environment. The environment of the child and experiences they have gone through can be a factor in the development of PTSD. How long were they involved in the traumatic situation? What was the severity of the trauma? Generally speaking, the longer the trauma lasts, particularly in repeat offenses such as neglect, physical, sexual, emotional, or mental abuse, the more likely a child is to develop PTSD.

The National Center for PTSD cites a variety of events that can cause PTSD in children to develop. Some of these events include:

- Seeing someone else killed or injured
- Sexual or physical abuse
- Natural disasters
- Witnessing disasters such as school shootings, car crashes, or fires

Other events that may lead to the development include:

- Neglect
- Domestic abuse
- Threat with a weapon
- Violent assaults
- Life-threatening illness diagnosis

## **How Common is PTSD in Children & Teens?**

One cause of PTSD is abuse of a child. The National Center for PTSD states that three to ten million children witness family violence each year. Approximately 40%-60% of those incidents involve child abuse. Keep in mind that it is thought that two-thirds of child abuse cases are not reported.

According to the National Center for PTSD, studies show that 15%-43% of girls and 14%-43% of boys go through at least one trauma during their lifetime. Of those children and teens, 3%-15% of girls and 1%-6% of boys will develop PTSD. Certain types of trauma may increase the risk for a child to develop PTSD.

## **Signs & Symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Children & Teens**

When a young child experiences an event or events that leads to the development of PTSD, they will often struggle with different symptoms than a teenager or adult would. The National Center for PTSD breaks down symptoms into age groups. A school-aged child is defined as an individual between the ages of 5 and 12 years old. A teenager will be someone between 12 and 18 years old.

# PTSD in Young Children

While school-aged children may not suffer flashbacks or have issues remembering their trauma, they may place the events of the time of the trauma in the wrong order. They may also believe that there were indications that the trauma was going to take place that may occur again. They believe it is up to them to see these signs to avoid future traumas.

Children from 5-12 may exhibit signs of PTSD when they play. They may repeatedly 'play' the trauma they experienced. This will not aid the child in working through the trauma. For example, a child might want to play shooting games after witnessing a school shooting.

# PTSD in Teenagers

Teenagers are at a transitional period in life. They may respond to PTSD in similar ways to an adult or a child. One difference, however, is that younger teens are more likely to act out in aggression or impulsive behavior as a result of PTSD.

Children and teens living through trauma are likely to exhibit multiple signs and symptoms of PTSD. Symptoms will typically develop within the first 3 months after the traumatic incident or experience. However, symptoms can take several months to years before they become evident. While some PTSD symptoms are easy to identify, some symptoms will remain hidden and pose more of a challenge to understand.

Some symptoms of PTSD include:

## Behavioral Symptoms:

- Reenactment of the trauma through play
- Loss of interest in activities
- Outburst of [Anger](#)
- Reckless Behavior
- Regression

## Physical Symptoms:

- Headaches and Stomachaches
- Changing [Sleep Patterns](#)
- Low Basal Cortisol Levels
- Feeling the Event is Happening Again
- Altered Metabolism

## Cognitive Symptoms:

- Increased concentration (especially in school)
- Negative cognitive development
- Altered cognitive functioning
- Recollection of event is out of order

## Psychosocial Symptoms:

- Sadness
- Guilt
- Emotionally numb
- Low Self-Esteem
- Distrust
- Avoidance of Memories
- Flashbacks
- Nightmares
- Fear of death
- Worry

## Effects of PTSD in Children and Teens

It is not uncommon for children or teens to keep the symptoms of PTSD a secret. The feelings of anxiety, fear, guilt, or shame may keep a child or teen from seeking help with symptoms of PTSD.

Because of this, teens will often try to ‘self-medicate’ using tactics such as:

- [Sexual Exploration](#)
- [Substance Abuse](#)
- [Alcohol Abuse](#)
- [Self Harm](#)
- [Aggression](#)
- [Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors](#)

Teens who are dealing silently with the effects of PTSD can be more prone to:

- Borderline Personality Disorder
- [Oppositional Defiant Disorder](#)
- [Conduct Disorder](#)
- Cardiovascular Disease
- Pain Disorder
- [Anxiety Disorder](#)

- [Depression](#)
- Autoimmune Diseases
- Musculoskeletal Conditions

## PTSD Treatment for Teenagers and Children

One method for working with teens and children suffering from PTSD is through [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) (CBT). Methods include allowing the child to speak through their memories and trauma. This method helps to lower stress levels in the teen. The therapy may also offer the teen the ability to change their thoughts or beliefs (such as thoughts of the world being completely unsafe). An effective option for teens suffering from PTSD is a residential therapeutic option such as Shepherd's Hill Academy. Shepherd's Hill offers a safe and consistent environment for teens to live and thrive. During our 1 year program, your teen will work with our [highly qualified therapists](#) and counselors, developing positive habits and coping mechanisms to heal.

Our 5 to 1 student to staff ratio ensures that your child is always safe and receives personalized care and attention in order to successfully treat PTSD. Our staff have experience with teens suffering from PTSD, as well as other behavior disorders such as anxiety disorders, depression, personality disorders, oppositional defiant disorders, and more.

If your teen is suffering from PTSD, please give us a call. You can also [inquire online](#) to see how the staff at Shepherd's Hill Academy can offer hope and healing to your whole family!

## Resources:

- <http://www.villagebh.com/disorders/ptsd/symptoms-signs-effects>
- <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/family/ptsd-children-adolescents.asp>