"I have a friend who may have post-traumatic stress disorder. What are the causes, symptoms and treatments for it?"

What is PTSD?

When you're in danger, it's natural to feel afraid. This fear triggers many split-second changes in your body to prepare to defend against the danger or to avoid it. This "fight-or-flight" response is a healthy reaction meant to protect a person from harm. But in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), this reaction is changed or heightened. People who have PTSD may feel stressed or frightened even when they're no longer in danger.

PTSD develops after a terrifying ordeal that involved physical harm or the threat of physical harm. The person who develops PTSD may have been the one who was harmed, the harm may have happened to a loved one, or the person may have witnessed a harmful event that happened to loved ones or strangers.

Some events that can cause PTSD are:

- Combat
- Terrorist attacks
- Physical or psychological abuse
- Serious accidents, such as a car wreck
- Natural disasters, such as a fire, tornado, flood or earthquake

What are the symptoms?

After going through a traumatic event, you may:

- Feel upset by things that remind you of what happened
- Have nightmares, vivid memories, or flashbacks of the event. You may feel like it's happening all over again.
- Avoid places or things that remind you of what happened
- Feel numb or lose interest in things you used to care about
- Feel that you are always in danger
- Be anxious, jittery or irritated
- Have trouble sleeping or keeping your mind on one thing

PTSD symptoms can change your behavior and how you live your life. You may pull away from other people, work all the time, or use drugs or alcohol. You may find it hard to be in relationships, and you may have problems with your spouse and family. You may become depressed. Some people with PTSD also have panic attacks, which are sudden feelings of fear or worry that something bad is about to happen.

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What can you do if you think you have PTSD?

If you think you have PTSD, it's important to get treatment. Treatment can work, and early treatment may help reduce long-term symptoms. Here are some actions you can take:

- Talk to your family doctor.
- Talk to a mental health professional, such as a therapist.
- If you're a veteran, contact your local VA hospital or Vet Center.
- Talk to a close friend or family member. He or she may be able to support you and find you help.
- Talk to a religious leader.

How is PTSD treated?

The most effective treatments for PTSD are:

- Counseling, which can help you understand your thoughts and learn ways to cope with your feelings. It can also help you feel more in control and get you back to the activities in your life.
- Anxiety medicines, which can help you feel less anxious.

You may need to try different types of treatment before finding the ones that work for you. Your doctor will help you with this. These treatments may include other types of medicines and other forms of counseling, such as group counseling. Treatment can help you feel more in control of your emotions, have fewer symptoms, and enjoy life again.

Do you need help?

If you have thoughts about hurting yourself or someone else, call 911, 1-800-273-TALK (suicide hotline), or go to a hospital emergency room.

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