

“Do’s and Don’ts” to avoid Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after a Situation



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Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can happen to anyone—kids, adults, men, women—on the job or off. It develops when symptoms after a situation don’t stop in the first few weeks, and do cause distress in your life.

There are 3 signs of PTSD:

- 1) re-experiencing the situation through flashbacks, stressful dreams, or memories that suddenly pop into your head;
- 2) having physical reactions to strong emotions that make it hard to fall or stay asleep, being irritable or angry about little things, having trouble concentrating or over active startle reactions like jumping at noises and heart pounding, and always feeling on guard or constantly looking over your shoulder when you don’t need to; and
- 3) avoiding reminders of the situation including people and places, avoiding sleep to keep from having stressful dreams, and numbing out to avoid strong emotions that lead to physical arousal.

Many people are exposed to traumatic situations. In police work critical situations can happen more frequently than for the general population. In the time immediately

after a situation most people will have some of the symptoms associated with PTSD. Over time those symptoms naturally decrease and don’t lead to a PTSD diagnosis. There are some people who don’t fully recover, and are later diagnosed with PTSD, because something got in the way of the natural recovery process. So, PTSD can be thought of as a “recovery” problem.

There are a several reasons why the recovery process might get “stuck” along the way. A common reaction when someone is faced with a potentially lifethreatening situation is the “fight-flight” or “freeze” response. In the fight-flight response the body is preparing itself to either fight the danger or flee it. The heart and lungs need to get blood and oxygen out to the arms and legs immediately so they pound hard and fast. Hormones are secreted to stop physical pain (cortisol—a steroid) and increase heart rate and muscle tension (adrenalin—a stimulant).

Because the blood is taken from the internal organs—and the brain—it can feel like you’ve been kicked in the gut or are going to faint. It can be hard to think or concentrate. With the freeze response the body is trying to reduce physical and emotional pain. This can lead to complete emotional shut down, and even to changes in perception as if time has slowed down and like the

situation is happening to your body but you aren’t in it.

The fight-flight response can quickly get paired up with “cues” or things in the environment that didn’t have particular meaning before. These cues can be a sight (baby back ribs), a smell (burrito), a sound (fireworks), or even a time when your body reacts as if you’re in the situation all over again. And, if you avoid these reminder cues then your body won’t have a chance to learn that these cues are not good warnings of danger. This can lead to losing trust in your own senses or judgment about what is and isn’t dangerous. Eventually too many situations seem dangerous that are not.

So, how do you help the natural recovery process so you don’t get stuck with PTSD? Try these for: Reexperiencing the situation:

Do: Tell your whole story from before the situation started until after it was over to someone you trust (family member or friend) and to a professional who is trained to work with PTSD. For everybody else have a “Cliff Notes” or “elevator pitch” (30 seconds or less) version that might go something like this:

“Thank you for being concerned about me. I had a situation at work, it was bothering me, and I’m getting the help I need to get over it.”

Don't: Feel the need to tell the whole story to everybody who asks about it. You'll have co-workers and family members who will be legitimately concerned about you, and you don't need to tell the same story over and over to each one. There may come a time when you will want to tell them the whole story. For now-tape off the situation.

Do: Go ahead and feel the normal, natural things-fear, sadness, anger, disgust-that come up when you think about it. Do, however, put barricades around how often and how long you let yourself to think about it before moving onto something else.

Don't: Talk about or spend a lot of time thinking about what happened right before bedtime. Get into a bedtime routine that is relaxing and prepares you for sleep. Don't watch disturbing movies or news on TV or play violent video games. Don't talk about the situation in bed. The bed is for 2 things only-sleep and sex. Enjoy both!

Physical arousal and strong emotions

Do: Learn to breath in through your nose. This engages the "rest and digest" response. It brings blood and oxygen back to your brain and internal organs-the opposite of fight-flight. Practice deep breathing, in through your nose, when you don't need it. Put it in muscle memory.

Don't: Breath in through your mouth. Mouth breathing activates the fight-flight response. Do it and hear how much you gasp for air!

Do: Get regular physical exercise

while you are getting back to normal. Exercise gets oxygen to your brain so you can think clearly and it releases endorphins, the body's own natural morphine. Endorphins kill physical and emotional pain and make us feel good. The best news is endorphins are free and come without needle marks.

Don't: Numb out in front of the TV or start using cigarettes, alcohol, heavy medications or video games to kill the what's coming up. You'll just be postponing your recovery.

Avoidance

Do: When a sound, sight, smell, person or place causes your heart to feel like its going to jump out of your chest, stay where you are and breath through your nose until your heart stops pounding. Remind yourself that the jackhammer you hear at the construction site isn't a gun and it won't hurt you.

Don't: Avoid the things that trigger the fight-flight response. Once you start down the "avoidance" path it is much harder to come back.

Do: Get on a regular sleep schedule, and do relaxing things just before bed (see above).

Don't: Avoid going to bed because you don't want to have bad dreams. If you follow the do's the bad dreams will go away.

While there is no guarantee you will never experience PTSD, you can learn the tools that will help you avoid PTSD. Follow the do's and don'ts above and you will reduce the possibility of getting "stuck" in your recovery and developing PTSD. Experiment with

your own tools- your own "Me Tube" imaginary videos that take your worry thoughts out of your head. One police officer told me about a strategy that has worked for her for years. When she goes to bed and can't go to sleep because there's just too much on her mind, she writes each of her stressors on an imaginary blackboard like she had in elementary school. She then erases the entire blackboard. But, there might be some shadows of chalk still left on the board so she goes back and washes it down with a wet sponge. As a kid, when the blackboard was clean she could go out to play. Washing down the backboard now means she can rest assured those issues are out of her mind.