

# PTSD and Addiction Examined

By Jim Rachels



It is said that anywhere from 3-4% of the United States has had or has PTSD. It's usually that 8% of women show signs of PTSD as compared to 4% for men. Also, one study showed that between 45-50% of people with PTSD also showed signs and symptoms of a substance abuse disorder(SUD). PTSD can happen to anyone that has had a traumatic event happen to them or has witnessed a traumatic event. While research shows that up to 70% of the population has experienced a traumatic event over their lifetime, only about 8% go on to develop PTSD. This is not a case of a person being weak. In fact, people suffering from PTSD are some of the strongest people around. Having to face this on a daily basis can be a daunting task. One that takes courage and strength. Unfortunately, many people go on to develop substance abuse issues that affect their lives. Many of us just want to numb ourselves from some type of pain we are experiencing.

So what happens in our brains to lead us to develop PTSD? Following a traumatic event our brain chemistry changes, and we end up producing fewer endorphins. These are chemicals in the brain that lead us to feel better, more upbeat, and in a good mood. This is what leads many of us to addiction. We look for things that produce more endorphins since our brain isn't making enough. Then once we find something to help produce more endorphins we continue to use it until we develop an addiction.

“Nearly three-quarters of those surviving violent or abusive trauma report alcohol use disorders.”

- U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs

Here are some of the common traumatic events that have been shown to lead a person to have PTSD:

- Sexual assault or rape
- Childhood abuse
- Natural disaster
- Being threatened with a weapon
- An accident, such as a car accident
- The loss of a friend or family member
- Exposure to a wartime setting
- Sexual or physical abuse as a child
- Physical assault
- Seeing someone die

So what then is PTSD? PTSD is an anxiety disorder. It is triggered by the thoughts of past events either experienced and in some cases just seen.

This can be manifested in many ways such as a flashback to a previous traumatic event and it can even come when you're sleeping in the form of nightmares. It is something that you cannot escape if you are facing these issues.

This is from PsychGuides.com:

"PTSD is a mental health disorder that develops after exposure to a traumatic event. The traumatic event may be experienced directly, witnessed, or happen to someone close to you."

Different people obviously have different events that shape their lives. But many of our lives do share things in common when we examine them a little bit closer. Things such as childhood trauma and

So what are the signs and symptoms of PTSD? The first thing I think would be most noticeable is having troubling thoughts or nightmares about a specific situation that you have seen or been through and experienced. When someone has constant troubling thoughts running through their head it can really throw someone off balance and really affect their day-to-day functioning. Another thing that is often associated with PTSD is intense flashbacks of a traumatizing event and this can make one feel like they are experiencing that traumatic event all over again.

This can then lead to avoidance issues. This can play a crucial role in PTSD. This is where you do things some of which may not be good for you in order to simply forget and even avoid the painful impact of what is going on. This can be a crippling experience.

Through research, it has been shown that there might be three main parts of avoidance. The avoidance of thoughts and feelings, avoidance of activity, and avoidance of memory.

For the avoidance of thoughts and feelings, some signs that people tend to show are trying not to think or talk about what has happened to them.

Avoidance of activity can leave a person feeling alone and isolated, a feeling of disconnection. With this, you try to avoid all activities that may remind you of the past trauma. You might even stray away from friendships that might lead you to have to face your feelings. Many of us will do what's necessary to avoid facing our problems.

Then there is the avoidance of memory. What happens here is you avoid everything so much to the point you may not even be able to remember the events that have happened to you. The moment you have a thought or memory from something traumatic instead of confronting this you simply distract yourself from reality.

Many people that are using drugs while they have PTSD are stuck in an endless cycle. Many people use drugs to alleviate the symptoms of their PTSD when in fact they are adding fuel to the fire. People will suddenly stop their substance abuse only to then experience withdrawals where those symptoms are similar to that of PTSD creating the endless cycle of withdrawal and then abuse.

So what is the relationship between PTSD and addiction? This is from WebMD:

"The brain of someone diagnosed with PTSD or following a traumatic event produces fewer endorphins," according to Eileen Dewey, LCSW-C, SAP, a program administrator at Columbia Treatment Center. "Under such conditions, individuals often turn to substances to help produce the endorphins they crave, Dewey says." This is just one of the many studies that have been done.

Trauma is developed in many different ways. For many of us that have experienced trauma, it most likely started in childhood. This can be verbal, emotional and physical abuse in the history of someone. Perhaps the parent neglected and ignored their children leaving a lasting scar that can't be seen but is felt inside.

When it comes to repeated trauma over a period of months maybe even years it is called Complex PTSD or CPTSD. Many people with PTSD and CPTSD experience flashbacks. Many of these people are not aware of the fact that they are having a flashback. This can lead to an extremely difficult situation to handle.

So the big question is how do we deal with this once we're diagnosed? I think the first thing that should be researched is finding a rehab and a doctor who offers treatment for dual diagnosis patients. Many facilities surprisingly are not equipped for this. So if you are to get better you must find the right professionals to help you along in your journey to sobriety. Many of these professionals understand that they need to take an integrated approach. One thing that almost everyone agrees on is that people with PTSD and addiction issues can benefit tremendously from Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and many times pharmacotherapy. Talk therapy has been shown to be of tremendous help and a foundation on which to build your recovery on. One main goal of this therapy is to familiarize the patient with the inner workings of their mind and how to best use this information to help in their recovery. If one is familiar with the way their brain works they are able to then take more effective measures to help maintain their sobriety.

There are many things that facilities offer such as inpatient and outpatient services. Depending on the level of severity one might be chosen over the other. For the more severe cases, inpatient services are typically utilized first. For some, it would be beneficial to just do outpatient services. This is on a case-by-case basis.

In the end I think that PTSD and addiction should be studied much more than it is right now as this is something that many people suffer from. We need to have the resources and help available, especially for those in recovery.