



Inner strength

**First responders mental health and PTSD
awareness guidebook**

Aetna Resources For LivingSM

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Police, fire fighters, EMTs, emergency dispatchers and more — You're dedicated to helping others. But what happens when the helpers need help?



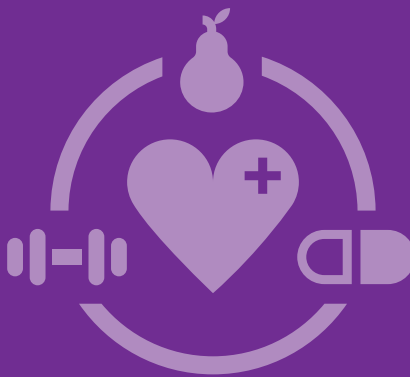
For many workers, job stress includes extra projects and unlikable co-workers. But your job stress is unique. You're exposed to traumatic events on a regular basis.

That can come at a cost. In one study, 85 percent of first responders reported having symptoms for a mental health issue . And one-third of them were diagnosed with depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).¹ But there's hope. Treatment, support and understanding can help you cope with the stress of your job.

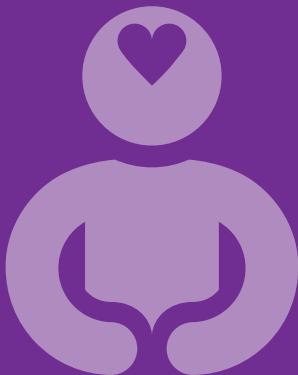
¹Amato, Valerie. [Survey shows high rates of depression, PTSD among first responders](#). EMS World. Accessed September 2018.



Mental health problems often respond well to treatment. But barriers and lack of understanding can keep people from getting the help they need. And without help, families can suffer from lost wages, unemployment, unhealthy patterns and other setbacks.



You can take simple steps to raise awareness and improve mental health for yourself and others. Learn the facts about mental health. We've compiled a list of helpful articles and resources here.



Take time to learn more about this key issue. Through awareness and education, we can change the mental health conversation.

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Make a difference



Misconceptions about mental health

People with mental health issues don't just have to cope with their symptoms. They also have to deal with stereotypes, prejudice and lack of understanding. Even though mental health issues are common, many believe it's a sign of weakness or makes people dangerous. So it's treated like a shameful secret.

These misconceptions can prevent people from getting the care they deserve. Here's how:

- **People feel ashamed and embarrassed.** You wouldn't feel like you had to hide your heart disease or cancer. People who have a mental health condition often feel ashamed.
- **People deny there's a problem.** Some believe you should be able to cure yourself because "it's all in your head."
- **People don't seek help.** If you're keeping your illness a secret because you're embarrassed, it's harder to seek help.

Mental health stigma and its effects can be worse than the mental health problem itself. This can lead to isolation, loneliness, shame and secrecy.

People can get better

With the right help and support, people can get better! Every person is unique. And there are various treatment options out there. So each person should search for the option that works best for his or her needs. Treatment can include medication, therapy and wellness plans. The important thing is for people to reach out and seek help.

What you can do to help

You don't have to be a therapist to make a difference. Consider these tips:

- Use respectful language when talking about mental health
- Learn more about mental health issues
- Speak out against mental health stigma and speak up for mental health awareness

People with mental illness can feel alone. If you think someone is dealing with a mental health problem, listen without judgment. Be present. Encourage the person to seek help from their doctor or a mental health professional. And convey hope. If you want to learn more, check out these resources:

- **The Campaign to Change Direction.** You can take the pledge at changedirection.org
- **Mental Health First Aid.** Sign up for a general mental health first aid course or one specially developed for first responders at mentalhealthfirstaid.org

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and support,
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better!



Depression



Depression is one of the most common mental health problems people face today. Each year major depression affects approximately 16 million Americans. And it's the leading cause of disability worldwide.²

It's not uncommon to experience feelings of sadness every so often. But when these feelings last for longer periods of time or are really severe, you may have clinical depression.

Depression can interfere with the ability to work, study, sleep, eat and enjoy activities you once enjoyed. It may even be hard to get out of bed in the morning. Fortunately, we're gaining a better understanding of depression which has led to highly effective treatments.

We now know depression involves biological, psychological and environmental factors. Recent events in someone's life may play a role. Increased stress and poor coping skills may also contribute to depression.

² [Mental Health by the Numbers](#). National Alliance on Mental Illness. Accessed March 2018.



Symptoms of depression

The number and severity of depression symptoms can vary from one person to another. Some people experience only a few symptoms while others experience many. Common symptoms include:

- Persistent sad mood
- Feelings of hopelessness
- Feelings of guilt or worthlessness
- Loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies or enjoyable activities
- Decreased energy, fatigue, feeling "slowed down"
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Problems sleeping
- Appetite and/or weight changes
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Restlessness or irritability
- Persistent physical complaints such as headaches or chronic pain

Causes of depression

In some families, major depression appears to show up in each generation. But there doesn't have to be a family history of depression for it to occur.

- People who have low self-esteem, who consistently view themselves and the world with pessimism or who are easily overwhelmed by stress are also prone to depression.
- People with medical illnesses such as stroke, a heart attack, cancer or hormonal disorders often experience depressive symptoms. These symptoms may then make the medical condition worse or prolong recovery.
- A serious loss, difficult relationship, financial problem or any stressful (unwelcome or even desired) change in life patterns can also trigger a depressive episode.

Very often, a combination of factors is involved in the onset of a depressive disorder.





Understanding suicide

If you're like a lot of people, you may feel uncomfortable when the subject of suicide comes up. It's important to think about where those feelings come from. Maybe they come from fear, stigma or something else.

Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the United States, claiming more than 44,000 lives in a given year.³

This raises important questions:

- What can you do to stay healthy?
- What if someone you know threatens to hurt him or herself?
- What should you do if a coworker seems depressed?

The good news is, you don't have to be a therapist to help.

Know the signs

Many people who attempt suicide give warning signs. Take these signs seriously. You could save a life. Here are some common signs that someone may be thinking about suicide:

- Talking about wanting to die
- Looking for a way to kill oneself, like searching online or getting a gun
- Talking about feeling hopeless
- Withdrawing from family or friends
- Giving away prized possessions
- Putting affairs in order — like updating a will
- Taking risks
- Saying goodbye like it's the last time

³ [Suicide](#). National Institute of Mental Health. Accessed February 2018.

Risk factors

Anyone can be at risk for suicidal thinking or behavior. But these factors can put a person at greater risk:

- Access to guns or pills
- Drug and alcohol use
- Prior suicide attempts
- Feeling alone
- Feeling angry
- Feeling like a burden
- Tolerance for violence or pain
- Chronic illness
- Money problems
- Family history of suicide



What can you do if someone seems suicidal?

If someone you know seems depressed or suicidal, it can be scary. Know that you don't have to fix the person's feelings or solve his or her problem. But there are things you can do.

Focus on listening and giving support. Here are some tips to consider:

- Ask the person if he or she is thinking about suicide — it will open up the conversation
- Take all threats seriously
- Call a suicide hotline to get advice
- Don't leave a suicidal person alone
- Call 911

Hospitals are a good resource. They can assess a person's risk of self-harm and get help. If you know someone has a plan and the means for suicide, get him or her to a hospital. Depending on the person's risk or location, you can always call 911.

Talking to a suicidal person

Don't underestimate the power of being present. It can give hope and help someone feel less alone. If you feel like you don't know what to say, ask questions and listen. Here are some other tips:

- **Ask questions.** It's important to ask if the person is thinking about death or suicide.
- **Encourage treatment.** Know it's not your job to take the place of a therapist.
- **Offer to help find support.** You can research treatment options, make calls or arrange for a ride to the hospital for an assessment.
- **Remove dangerous items.** If you can, try to remove things like knives, razors, guns or drugs from the person's possession. Don't put yourself in danger. If you're not nearby and you know the person has access to lethal means, call 911.
- **Take threats seriously.** Avoid making light of threats, talking about yourself, using guilt trips or daring the person to engage in suicide.

Suicide is scary. And for some, talking about suicide can be scary too. By asking the hard questions, listening and connecting people to resources, you can make a difference.



Anxiety



Facts about anxiety

Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health condition in the United States. In fact, 40 million U.S. adults are affected by an anxiety disorder.⁴

Everyone worries. But how do you know your worrying is an issue? We've put together some facts about this important topic.

What does anxiety feel like?

Anxiety isn't just a feeling. It often shows itself in the body. It can look like:

- Racing heart
- Shaking hands
- Dry mouth
- Sweaty palms
- Upset stomach

When a person feels anxious over a long period of time, he or she might have other symptoms. Of course it's important to check with a doctor to figure out the cause. But anxiety can lead to issues such as sleep or digestion problems, headaches or lowered immunity. And it can make other health issues flare up.

⁴ [Facts & Statistics](#). Anxiety and Depression Association of America. Accessed March 2018.

⁵ Sanders, Robert. [New evidence that chronic stress predisposes brain to mental illness](#). Berkeley News. Accessed March 2018.

⁶ [Causes of Anxiety and Depression: Symptoms and Signs](#). The Ranch. Accessed March 2018.

What causes anxiety?

Most people feel scared or anxious at some time in their lives. And it's normal to worry about things at times. Many people feel anxious when they're faced with a life problem, decision or change. But anxiety disorders are different. They can get in the way of people living the lives they want.

Feelings of fear are meant to help us. So when we feel fear or anxiety, it's our bodies trying to help us cope. It doesn't mean we're weak. Science shows most mental health issues are due to complex factors.

Anxiety disorders may result from biological factors that change the way the brain works. Studies have shown long-term stress can change nerve centers in the brain.⁵ Anxiety can also run in families. And sometimes a trauma or even a welcome event such as a wedding or promotion can trigger anxiety.⁶

People often read about disorders and think they have one. Keep reading to find questions that might help you decide if your anxiety is an issue.



What are the types of anxiety disorders?

People get anxious about different things. But when it comes to anxiety disorders, most of them fall into one of these categories:

- **Panic disorder.** People with this condition have feelings of terror that can strike out of the blue. Panic disorder can look and feel like a heart attack. It can include symptoms such as sweating, chest pain, choking and irregular heartbeat.
- **Social anxiety disorder.** This is sometimes called social phobia. It involves fear of being judged by others or acting in a way that might cause embarrassment. It can lead to a person being afraid of common social situations.
- **Specific phobias.** A phobia is an intense fear of a specific object or situation. Common phobias involve snakes, heights or flying. Some phobias may cause people to avoid everyday situations.
- **Generalized anxiety disorder.** This disorder involves extreme worry, even if there is little or nothing to provoke the anxiety. Friends and family might call a person with generalized anxiety disorder a “worry wart.”
- **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).** A person may experience PTSD after seeing or living through a trauma. This disorder includes thoughts you can’t get rid of, flashbacks or nightmares. A person may avoid things and situations linked with the trauma.

How do I know if I need help managing my anxiety?

It’s normal to have some anxiety. But how do you know if you could use a little help? If your anxiety gets in the way of living the life you want, you may want to seek help. You don’t have to be a therapist to know if anxiety is causing you issues. Ask yourself if your worries:

- Keep you from going about your routine
- Prevent you from reaching your goals
- Leave you feeling overwhelmed

It’s a good idea for everyone to build skills to help manage stress and worry. If you notice your anxiety prevents you from living your life, there’s help out there. A counselor or therapist can help you develop skills to better manage your anxiety and stress.

How can I reduce my anxiety?

There are many treatments and self-help tools to help manage anxiety and fear. Treatment with a therapist with or without medication can make a big difference. Other healthy habits can help combat anxiety, such as exercise and meditation.

Lots of people struggle with anxiety. Many never ask for help.

You’re not alone. Treatment is available and it can really help. Anxiety shouldn’t keep you from living your life



Post-traumatic stress disorder



Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a type of anxiety disorder some people experience after being exposed to a traumatic event. A traumatic event is one that's very scary and distressing. It might be an accident, assault, natural disaster, combat, crime or ongoing neglect.

And you don't have to go through the event yourself to experience PTSD. Sometimes seeing, learning about or talking to others who went through the event can lead to a traumatic response.

Doctors aren't sure why this is so. But it may come down to individual differences. These may include a mix of factors like:

- Past trauma
- Family history of depression and anxiety
- Ability to manage stress
- Access to supports

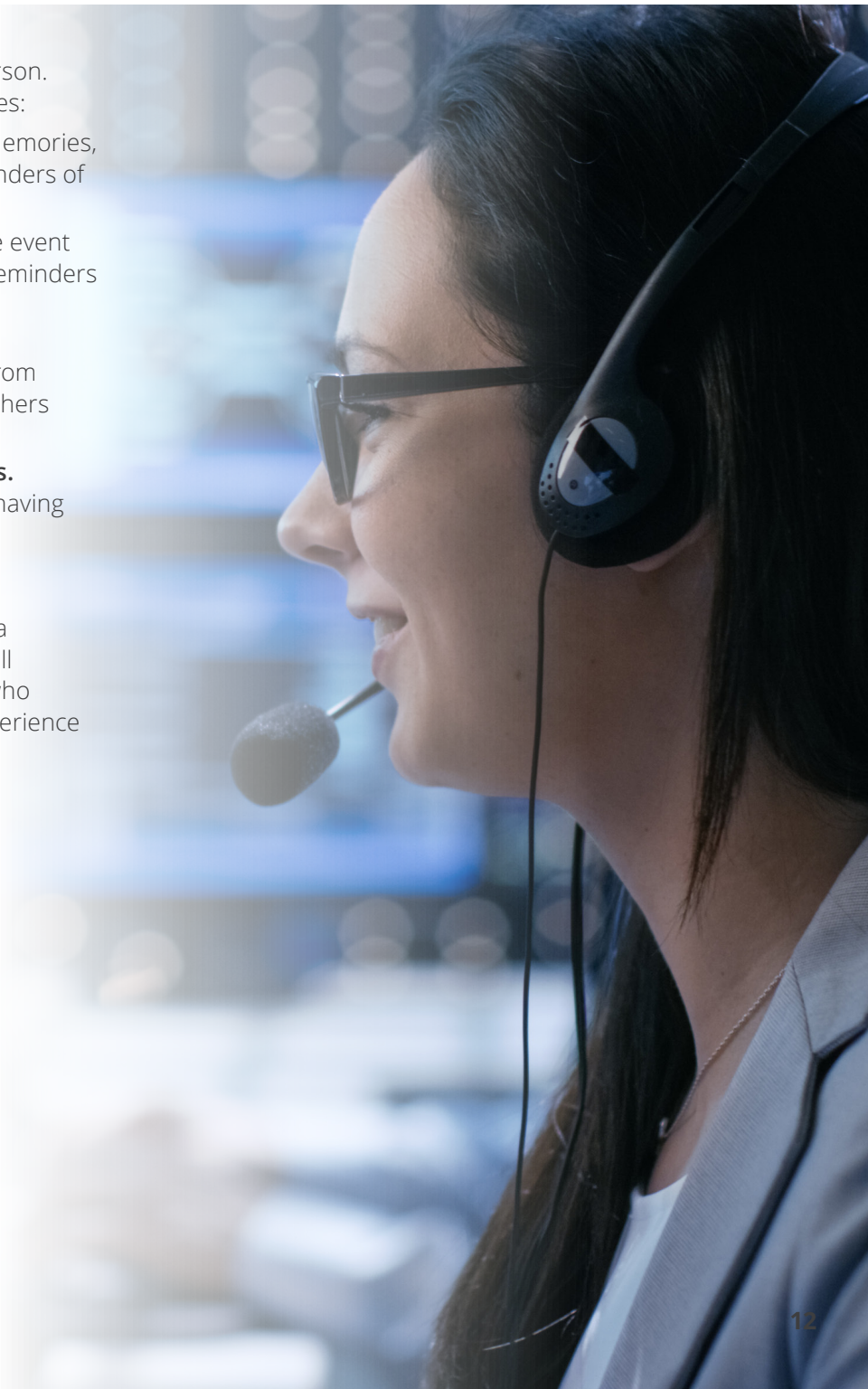
What are the symptoms of PTSD?

PTSD symptoms look a little different in each person. Symptoms tend to fall into the following categories:

- **Intrusive memories.** Nightmares, unwanted memories, flashbacks, severe distress in response to reminders of the event
- **Avoidance.** Trying not to think or talk about the event or avoiding people, places and things that are reminders of the event
- **Negative thoughts and feelings.** Emotional numbness, guilt and shame, feeling detached from others and having negative views of yourself, others or the world
- **Changes in physical and emotional reactions.** Emotional outbursts, being easily startled and having trouble sleeping

Who tends to get PTSD?

Most people will feel some sort of distress after a stressful or upsetting event. But not everyone will develop PTSD. In fact, within a group of people who experience the same crisis, only some might experience PTSD. Others won't.



First responders and PTSD

First responders and military personnel are at particular risk for PTSD. They may encounter one crisis after another. Over time, this stress can hurt their physical and mental health. And this can make them more prone to PTSD.

But it may be hard for first responders to seek help. Trained to respond to trauma, they might feel pressure to be “trauma-proof.” Experiencing distress might make them worry that they’re not up to the job. They may believe that their feelings show weakness. And they might be afraid of others’ judgment.

But trying to hide or ignore your distress can lead to bigger problems. It can make it harder to deal with those thoughts and feelings. Fortunately, many first responder organizations are making mental health a priority.



Treatment for PTSD

Some people with PTSD will try to ignore their symptoms or treat them with things like drugs and alcohol. And this can lead to a substance use disorder, relationship issues and other problems. But there's hope. Treatment can help PTSD.

There are different treatment options. Some involve talking or thinking about the traumatic event under the guidance of a professional. Others may address unhealthy beliefs about the event. And medication

prescribed by a doctor may help too. Treatment can be very effective and help people get back to a place of well-being.

Trauma can be a normal, human reaction to an abnormal event. But with understanding and treatment, people can recover.





Mental health and well-being resources

Mental illness doesn't just affect the person with the disease. It also affects anyone who cares about or lives or works with that person. Chances are, mental health conditions have touched your life in some way. If you want to learn more about mental health issues and how you can help, consider these resources.

Mental Health First Aid

Do you want to learn more about mental health problems and how to respond? Similar to CPR and First Aid training, Mental Health First Aid helps people identify, understand and respond to mental health issues. You can find a local training at [mentalhealthfirstaid.org](https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org).

General mental well-being

- National Institute of Mental Health
- Mental Health America
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Mental Health
- Person-First Language
- MindCheck®
- The Campaign to Change Direction

Mental health concerns

- Anxiety Disorders Association of America
- Depression Bipolar Support Alliance
- Schizophrenia and Related Disorders Alliance of America
- Postpartum Support International (PSI)
- National Alliance for the Mentally Ill
- Parenting Well — Resources for Parents with Mental Illness

Addiction

- Alcoholics Anonymous
- Narcotics Anonymous
- Gamblers Anonymous
- Al-Anon/Alateen
- SAMHSA National Mental Health Information Center — Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Suicide

- American Foundation for Suicide Prevention
- Suicide Prevention Resources Center
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
- Stop a Suicide

First responder resources

- Safe Call Now
- The Code Green Campaign
- Copline
- Fire/EMS helpline

You don't have to be a
mental health professional
to help someone with a
mental health issue.

Listen. Show support.
Raise awareness.

You can make a difference.



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