

Managing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and School

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Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can cause major and continuous disruptions in our daily lives, especially if we are enrolled in school. Healing from sexual violence while also trying to keep up with our academic obligations can be overwhelming. Sometimes we may not understand why studying, completing extra-curricular activities, or just feeling social is becoming increasingly difficult. Understanding what PTSD is and its symptoms can shed some light on why you may be struggling. In addition, knowing what your mind and body is going through can help you prepare and even find working solutions to manage PTSD.

What is PTSD?

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a type of anxiety disorder that's triggered by a traumatic event. You can develop post-traumatic stress disorder when you experience or witness an event that causes intense fear, helplessness or horror.

Many people who are involved in traumatic events have a brief period of difficulty adjusting and coping. But with time and healthy coping methods, such traumatic reactions usually get better. In some cases, though, the symptoms can get worse or last for months or even years. Sometimes they may completely disrupt your life. In these cases, you may have post-traumatic stress disorder.

What are some common characteristics of PTSD?

- Flashbacks, or reliving the traumatic event for minutes or even days at a time
- Upsetting dreams about the traumatic event
- Trying to avoid thinking or talking about the traumatic event
- Feeling emotionally numb
- Avoiding activities you once enjoyed
- Hopelessness about the future
- Memory problems
- Trouble concentrating

- Difficulty maintaining close relationships
- Irritability or anger
- Overwhelming guilt or shame
- Self-destructive behavior, such as drinking too much
- Trouble sleeping
- Being easily startled or frightened
- Hearing or seeing things that aren't there

Post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms can come and go. You may have more post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms during times of higher stress or when you experience reminders of what you went through. You may hear a car backfire and relive combat experiences, for instance. Or you may see a report on the news about a rape, and feel again the horror and fear of your own assault.

How does PTSD affect my school life?

When I look at the above list of common PTSD symptoms, I am still surprised at how much I can relate to it.

For me, PTSD created a wave-effect on my school life. Sometimes I would go through high points where I could focus intense amounts of energy into school to distract myself. But those peaks were short-lived compared to the lulls of depression and poor concentration that followed. It was during these low points that my motivation significantly decreased to study and go to class. I suffered from constant flashbacks and panic attacks, which just distanced me further from school. It seemed like all I thought about were the rapes. No matter how hard I tried, I was consumed with everything related to what had happened to me.

This in turn created procrastination and a constant struggle with homework and exams. Everything was always getting done last-minute and even though I promised myself the next assignment or test would be different, it rarely was. I didn't feel like I had the mental strength to even process the information in my classes. What's worse, the perfectionist in me saw all of this behavior as failure. I constantly criticized myself and felt that I had no

reason to struggle. It was a destructive and unproductive cycle.

How do I cope with PTSD and School?

What works for one person may not work for someone else, and struggles with PTSD and school can be very personal. Here are some suggestions that can hopefully help you feel better about managing school and PTSD.

1. Find a therapist or counselor. Many people struggle with PTSD for different reasons, and most therapists have experience in treating symptoms. A therapist can help you find the best way to manage and overcome your specific PTSD symptoms.

2. Try to identify which PTSD symptoms affect you: Which symptoms do you experience and when? Is there a pattern? Does going to a particular class always cause you to have flashbacks or panic attacks? Is hard to concentrate on studying? Does it feel too uncomfortable to be on campus so you just don't go to class anymore?

You may find that PTSD impacts nearly every aspect (if not all) of your academic life. That's okay. It did for me and it does for so many other survivors.

3. Try to come up with 1st, 2nd, and 3rd rated solutions: For example, if going to class on campus is becoming impossible, what would be your top 3 solutions to this problem? Would taking classes online or at a different time be better?

If a crowded campus is uncomfortable for you, maybe try taking classes in the morning, when campus is less crowded.

4. Break your work down into manageable steps. It can often feel overwhelming to think of your work as one big project, but doing things one small step at a time may help you feel more accomplished.

For example, instead of simply attempting to draft a thesis, you might try breaking it down into steps such as: doing a search for related literature and references, compare/contrast

previously published studies, draft an introduction, draft methods, draft results, etc.

5. Be open with your professors, if you want: If you're comfortable, let your professors or advisor(s) know what is going on. Often times they can bring to the table many solutions and compromises that are not publicized to general students. They may be more lenient with assignment extensions or exam dates, etc.

If this is something you do want to do, I think it would be beneficial to have specifics in mind on what you're struggling with and what you may need.

6. It's okay to take a break: It's perfectly acceptable to need and want to take a break from school. Whether you need one semester or a few years, your health and well-being is more important.

School is difficult and consuming enough without battling PTSD alone - it's okay to reach out for help and to ask for what you need from the people who are able to give it to you. Education is an important step towards the rest of your life and most people will be willing to structure their requirements around your needs.

Note: If you think you have symptoms of PTSD, please speak to a professional about your treatment options. Many schools offer free counseling to students. Contact your school to find out what options are available to you.

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