

PTSD and 4th of July

June is Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) Awareness Month. According to the National Center for PTSD, about seven or eight out of every 100 people will experience the disorder at some point in their lives. PTSD can develop after experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event that can range from a natural disaster or car accident to combat or sexual assault.

“In acute trauma victims, a lot of times what you’ll see is heightened fear, hypervigilance, fear of going anywhere near where the trauma happened, not wanting to talk about the trauma. A lot of times it will be anger or isolation,” explains Marybeth Evans, an OSF HealthCare licensed clinical social worker.

According to the American Psychological Association, a common misconception is that PTSD always stems from a single event. However, individuals who have survived prolonged or repeated trauma often develop complex PTSD.

“Complex trauma, or complex PTSD, is more something that is part of the person’s general functioning. They may have developed coping mechanisms to deal with ongoing anxiety. They also may experience hypervigilance. You see people that startle very easily or do not like to be in crowds,” Evans explains.

The 4th of July holiday is largely known for firework shows and loud parades. However, some people begin their celebrations early and they continue through the month of July. Because of this, this time of year can be difficult for many military veterans, as the loud booms of the fireworks can be very triggering for those who may be suffering from PTSD. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 11 to 20 out of every 100 veterans experience some form of PTSD.

For veterans who struggle with the 4th of July holiday, Evans recommends paying close attention to when fireworks displays will be happening in your neighborhood so you are not caught off guard. Additionally, if you are one of the many Americans who plan to shoot off fireworks sporadically throughout the remainder of summer, Evans advises toning down the celebration, because there may be veterans in your area dealing with PTSD.

“Be aware of when the firework shows are going to be happening in your neighborhood and try to keep the firework entertainment to that. And let anyone you know who is a veteran know that that’s what time they will take place so they can be prepared,” advises Evans.

In addition to knowing your triggers, when you are dealing with PTSD there may also be triggers that catch you off guard that you unfortunately cannot prepare for. While most people who struggle with this disorder do not like to talk about their PTSD, Evans does recommend leaning on the people you are with if something triggering occurs – whether it happens expectedly or not. This does not mean you need to share the details of your trauma, but finding someone you can trust is important in helping you feel safe and grounded.

“The best thing you can do in a situation like that is – if you’re with other people – let them know that ‘I am feeling very uncomfortable right now. I have had a trauma in the past and that event that just happened really triggered me and I need to feel safe.’ At times, I think you have to rely on the people around you,” Evans says.

Seeking treatment for PTSD can be a struggle for many. The first step is acknowledging you need help. Baby steps are key.

“I think PTSD just by its very nature is something occurs because you are not really dealing with the trauma. A lot of times people don’t deal with the trauma because they’re very fearful – they feel like they are back in the trauma when they talk about it,” explains Evans.

Evans says that slow and steady wins the race. You may not click with a therapist immediately, but it is OK to take your time finding a therapist or other mental health expert that works best with you and your specific situation.

“There are treatments that are effective, and I think if you ever want to feel like you are a part of your old life where you felt safe, then I think the best thing you can do is seek out somebody who knows how to treat it and can help you feel more safe in your everyday environment and deal with some of the trauma that you’ve been through,” says Evans.

If you or a loved one is struggling with PTSD, call 800-273-8255 – press “1” if you are a veteran. If you need immediate help, call 911 or go to your local emergency room.