

WHAT ARE POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS INJURIES?

Public safety personnel (PSP) and military members work to ensure the safety and security of Canadians. In this resource, we will explore what post-traumatic stress injuries (PTSI) are, factors that can lead to PTSIs, and common treatments.

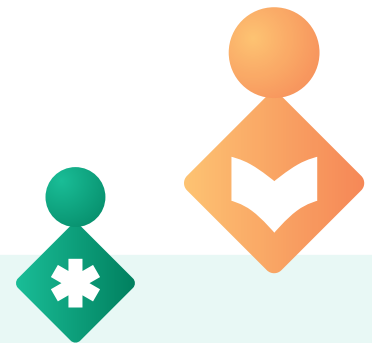
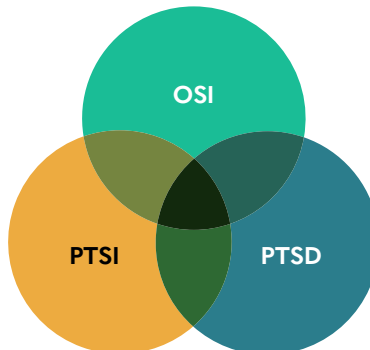
While it is usually rare for the general population to experience potentially traumatic events (e.g. traffic accidents, shootings, assault) in their lifetimes, PSP and military members experience potentially traumatic events on a regular basis, due to the nature of their work. Exposure to potentially traumatic events can have a significant impact the mental health and well-being of PSP and military members. These impacts can come in various forms, from increased stressors to diagnosed mental health conditions. When we talk about these impacts, several terms may be used. Some of the most common are:

Operational stress injury (OSI) refers to any mental health condition resulting from operational stressors (e.g. shift work, potentially traumatic events, lack of staff) experienced while serving in a professional capacity, especially in the military or PSP sectors. It is not a diagnosis.

Post-traumatic stress injury (PTSI) is a term that is most often used within the military and PSP communities in Canada. It refers to a mental health condition resulting from exposure to one or more potentially traumatic events. It is not a diagnosis.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition that can happen after exposure to severe potentially psychologically traumatic events (PPTEs) or after a build-up of PPTEs. PTSD is a clinically recognized condition that must be diagnosed by a qualified professional using accepted criteria.

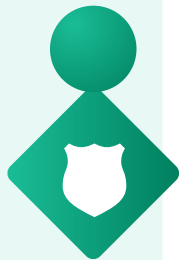
It's important to note that though these terms are often used interchangeably, they do cover separate injuries. Not all OSIs are PTSD, and not all PTSD diagnoses are related to OSIs. For the remainder of this guide, we will use the term PTSI.



Public safety personnel

The definition of public safety personnel (PSP) is evolving. All first responders can also be referred to as PSP. It is a broad term meant to include personnel who ensure the safety and security of Canadians.

PSP include but are not limited to: border services officers, public safety communicators, correctional workers, firefighters (career and volunteer), Indigenous emergency managers, operational intelligence personnel, paramedics, police (municipal, provincial, federal) and search and rescue personnel.



Canadian Institute for Public Safety Research and Treatment, 2022.



What is a PTSI?

- An injury that can occur after experiencing, witnessing or hearing about potentially traumatic events.
- A PTSI can occur after a single event or after a buildup of potentially traumatic events. Sometimes it is many little things instead of one big thing.
- This injury may or may not result in a diagnosed mental health disorder such as PTSD, major depressive disorder or generalized anxiety disorder.
- Experiencing a PTSI is not a sign of weakness. It is a normal response to abnormal events.
- It is unlikely that a PTSI will resolve on its own. If you need help, reach out to others (e.g. Family, friends, peers, professionals).

You're an ordinary person being asked to cope with extraordinary things.

— Former member of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police

What factors can lead to a PTSI?

How individuals are exposed to traumatic events varies across occupations. **Some experience trauma directly, whereas others experience trauma vicariously or secondhand** (e.g. from reviewing documentation or hearing about events as dispatchers). **Some key contributing factors:**

- Service in a conflict zone or other potentially violent environments
- Witnessing (seeing or hearing) atrocities or suffering during service, directly and indirectly
- Risk of verbal or physical assault or death during service
- Experiencing a natural disaster and providing rescue or relief support afterwards
- Terrorism, crime or mass violence
- Accidents or injuries
- Distressing events involving children
- Domestic abuse, intimate partner or Family violence
- Gender, race or culture-based attacks or stress
- Sexual-based violence

What can you feel or experience with PTSIs?

The experience of a PTSD may be different for each person. It can affect you as well as those around you. You may experience other mental and physical health diagnoses. PTSD can have a multitude of impacts across various domains of health and well-being:

- **Social** (e.g. difficulty maintaining relationships, unhealthy attachment, or withdrawal and isolation)
- **Physical** (e.g. sleep trouble, re-experiencing feelings and sensations, stomach issues/changes in appetite)
- **Behavioural** (e.g. avoiding reminders, turning to substances or other venues to avoid or numb emotions, no longer engaging in events that you enjoy, ignoring personal care routines)
- **Emotional** (e.g. having negative thoughts and feelings, feeling on edge or reactive, anger, feeling “flat” or numb [no emotional range])
- **Psychological** (PTSD typically includes symptoms of mental health disorders, suicidal ideation and attempts, and may include symptoms of substance use disorder)
- **Cognitive** (e.g. memory loss, difficulty concentrating)



How common are PTSIs?

Since PTSDs include mental health conditions that do not have a diagnosis, it is difficult to say precisely how many PSP and military members may struggle with a PTSD. However, research has revealed some figures for mental health conditions that fall under the PTSD umbrella:

- Around 10% of war zone Veterans experience PTSD at some point.
- A pan-Canadian survey of PSP showed that 44.5% screened positive for mental health disorder symptoms at the time of the study (compared to 10.1% seen in the general population), with 18% reporting three or more positive screens for various mental health disorders.
- For PTSD, 23.2% of PSP screened positive. There was great variation depending on the sector, with RCMP and correctional workers' rates at 30% and 29.1%, respectively.
- For depression, 26.4% of PSP screened positive. Over 30% of correctional workers, RCMP and public safety communicators had positive screen rates.
- For generalized anxiety, 18.6% of PSP screened positive. Over 23% of correctional workers and RCMP had positive screen rates.





Treatment for PTSIs

Seeking support from Family, friends and peers may help ease and heal a PTSTI. A professional can provide evidence-based treatments to help you deal with and recover from a PTSTI.

One of the most commonly used therapeutic approaches is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), which can be delivered in-person or online (ICBT). The availability of multiple modes of therapy has made CBT/ICBT an accessible option for assistance with symptoms of PTSTI.

That said, there are many other options available, therapy-based and otherwise. Learn more in [our written resource on coping with PTSIs](#).

Visit the website to learn more: atlasveterans.ca/PSP

References

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