

## PTSD & the family: Dealing with volatility and anger

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PTSD can lead to difficulties managing emotions and impulses. In your loved one, this may manifest as extreme irritability, moodiness, or explosions of rage. In fact, anger is so common in people with PTSD that it is considered one of the prime symptoms of hyperarousal.

### Understanding anger in PTSD

People suffering from PTSD live in a constant state of physical and emotional stress. To make matters worse, they usually have trouble sleeping. They are exhausted, on edge, and physically strung out—which increases the likelihood that they'll overreact to situations and stressors in their day-to-day life.

For many people with PTSD, anger can also be a cover for other feelings or a defense against grief, helplessness, guilt, or shame. They'd rather be mad than sad. Anger makes them feel powerful, instead of weak and vulnerable. For others, their anger is so intense that they're afraid of letting it out. Instead, they try to suppress it. But it simmers under the surface, like an active volcano, and can erupt when you least expect it.

- **Watch for signs that your loved one is angry.** Their face may get red, they may clench their jaw or fists, talk louder, start pacing, or get agitated. Take steps to defuse the situation as soon as you see the initial warning signs.
- **Try to remain calm.** During an emotional outburst, do your best to stay calm (or at least pretend to be). This will communicate to your loved one that you are "safe." It will also help keep the situation from escalating.
- **Give the person space.** Don't come closer unless asked and avoid crowding or grabbing the person. This can make a traumatized person feel threatened.
- **Ask how you can help.** For example: "Do you want me to help you calm down?" or "What can I do to help you right now?" You can also suggest a time out or change of scenery if you think that might help.
- **Put safety first.** If the person gets more upset despite your attempts to calm him or her down, stop what you're doing and go for help. Leave the house or lock yourself in a room if necessary. Call 911 immediately if you fear that your loved one may hurt himself or others.