

# INTERVENTION



## SYMPTOMS OF POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER



### GENERAL

Sexual abuse and assault leads to different symptoms depending on the person who was abused or assaulted, their relationship to the perpetrator, characteristics of the abuse or assault, and the person's psychological functioning prior to the incident. Some individuals can end up developing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a disorder that develops in some people who have experienced a shocking, scary or dangerous event.

### POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

The most common psychological disorder that is diagnosed based on symptoms that commonly emerge after a person has been sexually abused or assaulted is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Symptoms of PTSD include:

**HYPERAROUSAL:** this means being nervous and jumpy, having a heightened startle response, and reacting more strongly to things that promote anxiety

**INTRUSION:** this means frequent, intrusive thoughts about the abuse/assault or reliving aspects of the incident, either while awake or in nightmares. Intrusion also includes experiencing the same fear response that occurred during the incident in response to reminders of the incident. So, for example, if a person felt increased heart rate and rapid breathing due to fear during abuse perpetrated by a person wearing black clothing and then later feels increased heart rate and rapid breathing when they see another person wearing black clothing, this would be an intrusion symptom.

**AVOIDANCE:** this means avoiding reminders of the traumatic incident or avoiding thinking about the incident altogether. A person may avoid places, people, and things that remind them of the abuse or assault. Avoidance can start to spread from things closely related to a trauma to more general things. So, a person may start by avoiding the siblings of the male perpetrator and then may begin avoiding men altogether. Avoidance can greatly restrict a person's activities and people who are developing avoidant behaviors should be provided with helpful psychological treatment.



### SYMPTOMS OF ABUSE FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM

- Increased self-stimulating behaviors
- Increased self-injurious behaviors
- Decreased ability to communicate
- Wanting to stay where the incident happened
- Acting as if in a favorite cartoon, movie, or story
- Increase in disruptive behaviors

[www.paautism.org/BeSafe](http://www.paautism.org/BeSafe)

These resources were developed in collaboration with Angela Moreland, PhD and Grace Hubel, PhD,  
National Crime Victims Research and Treatment Center, Medical University of South Carolina.

ASERT is funded by the PA Department of Human Services, Office of Developmental Programs, Bureau of Autism Services