
Complex PTSD

From the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Department of Veterans Affairs

WWW.PTSD.VA.gov

Julia M. Whealin, PhD and Laurie Slone, PhD

How does short-term trauma differ from chronic trauma?

The diagnosis of PTSD accurately describes the symptoms that result when a person experiences a short-lived trauma. For example, car accidents, natural disasters, and rape are considered traumatic events of time-limited duration. However, chronic traumas continue or repeat for months or years at a time.

Clinicians and researchers have found that the current PTSD diagnosis often does not capture the severe psychological harm that occurs with such prolonged, repeated trauma. For example, ordinary, healthy people who experience chronic trauma can experience changes in their self-concept and the way they adapt to stressful events. Dr. Judith Herman of Harvard University suggests that a new diagnosis, Complex PTSD, is needed to describe the symptoms of long-term trauma (1). Another name sometimes used to describe this cluster of symptoms is: Disorders of Extreme Stress Not Otherwise Specified (DESNOS)(2).

Because results from the DSM-IV Field Trials indicated that 92% of individuals with Complex PTSD/DESNOS also met criteria for PTSD, Complex PTSD was not added as a separate diagnosis (3). However, Complex PTSD may indicate a need for special treatment considerations.

What types of trauma are associated with Complex PTSD?

Judith Herman notes that during long-term traumas, the victim is generally held in a state of captivity, physically or emotionally. In these situations the victim is under the control of the perpetrator and unable to flee.

Examples of such traumatic situations include:

- Concentration camps.
- Prisoner of War camps.
- Prostitution brothels.
- Long-term domestic violence.
- Long-term child physical abuse.

Complex PTSD (continued)

- Long-term child sexual abuse.
- Organized child exploitation rings

What are the symptoms of Complex PTSD?

The first requirement for the diagnosis is that the individual experienced a prolonged period (months to years) of total control by another. The other criteria are symptoms that tend to result from chronic victimization:

- **Alterations in emotional regulation.** May include persistent sadness, suicidal thoughts, explosive anger, or inhibited anger.
- **Alterations in consciousness.** Includes forgetting traumatic events, reliving traumatic events, or having episodes in which one feels detached from one's mental processes or body.
- **Changes in self-perception.** May include helplessness, shame, guilt, stigma, and a sense of being completely different from other human beings.
- **Alterations in how the perpetrator is perceived.** Examples include attributing total power to the perpetrator, becoming preoccupied with the relationship to the perpetrator, or preoccupied with revenge.
- **Alterations in relations with others.** Examples include isolation, distrust, or a repeated search for a rescuer.
- **Changes in one's system of meanings.** May include a loss of sustaining faith or a sense of hopelessness and despair.

What other difficulties do those with Complex PTSD tend to experience?

- Survivors may avoid thinking and talking about trauma-related topics because the feelings associated with the trauma are often overwhelming.
- Survivors may use alcohol and substance abuse as a way to avoid and numb feelings and thoughts related to the trauma.
- Survivors may also engage in self-mutilation and other forms of self-harm.

Blaming the victim

A person who has been abused repeatedly is sometimes mistaken as someone who has a "weak character." They have been misdiagnosed by mental health providers as having Borderline, Dependent, or Masochistic Personality Disorder. Survivors have been unjustly blamed for the symptoms they experience as a result of victimization. Researchers hope that a new diagnosis will prevent clinicians, the public, and those who suffer from trauma from mistakenly blaming survivors for their symptoms.

Summary

The current PTSD diagnosis often does not capture the severe psychological harm that occurs with prolonged, repeated trauma. For example, long-term trauma may affect a healthy person's self-concept and adaptation. The symptoms of such prolonged trauma have been mistaken for character weakness. Research is currently under way to determine if the Complex PTSD diagnosis is the best way to categorize the symptoms of patients who have suffered prolonged or repeated trauma.

Complex PTSD (continued)

References

1. Herman, J. (1997). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York: Basic Books.
2. Ford, J. D. (1999). Disorders of extreme stress following war-zone military trauma: Associated features of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder or comorbid but distinct syndromes? *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 67*, 3-12.
3. Roth, S., Newman, E., Pelcovitz, D., van der Kolk, B., & Mandel, F. S. (1997). Complex PTSD in victims exposed to sexual and physical abuse: Results from the DSM-IV field trial for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. *Journal of Traumatic Stress, 10*, 539-555.

The information on this Web site is presented for educational purposes only. It is not a substitute for informed medical advice or training. Do not use this information to diagnose or treat a mental health problem without consulting a qualified health or mental health care provider.

All information contained on these pages is in the public domain unless explicit notice is given to the contrary, and may be copied and distributed without restriction.

For more information call the PTSD Information Line at (802) 296-6300 or send email to ncptsd@ncptsd.org. This page was last updated on Mon Sep 18 14:48:11 2000.

The Center for Integrated Healthcare gratefully acknowledges the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders for authorship of information contained within this brochure.