



## Treatment of PTSD

By Jessica Hamblen, PhD

Today, there are good treatments available for PTSD. When you have PTSD, dealing with the past can be hard. Instead of telling others how you feel, you may keep your feelings bottled up. Yet talking with a therapist can help you get better.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is one type of counseling. It appears to be the most effective type of counseling for PTSD. There are different types of cognitive behavioral therapies such as cognitive therapy and exposure therapy. The VA is providing two forms of cognitive-behavioral therapy to Veterans with PTSD:

- [Cognitive Processing Therapy \(CPT\)](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/cognitive_processing_therapy.asp) ([www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/cognitive\\_processing\\_therapy.asp](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/cognitive_processing_therapy.asp))
- [Prolonged Exposure therapy \(PE\)](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/prolonged-exposure-therapy.asp) (<http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/prolonged-exposure-therapy.asp>)

There is also a similar kind of therapy called eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) that is used for PTSD. Medications have also been shown to be effective. A type of drug known as a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), which is also used for depression, is effective for PTSD.

### Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

#### What is cognitive therapy?

In cognitive therapy, your therapist helps you understand and change how you think about your trauma and its aftermath. Your goal is to understand how certain thoughts about your trauma cause you stress and make your symptoms worse.

You will learn to identify thoughts about the world and yourself that are making you feel afraid or upset. With the help of your therapist, you will learn to replace these thoughts with more accurate and less distressing thoughts. You also learn ways to cope with feelings such as anger, guilt, and fear.

After a traumatic event, you might blame yourself for things you couldn't have changed. For example, a soldier may feel guilty about decisions he or she had to make during war. Cognitive therapy, a type of CBT, helps you understand that the traumatic event you lived through was not your fault.

#### What is exposure therapy?

In exposure therapy your goal is to have less fear about your memories. It is based on the idea that people learn to fear thoughts, feelings, and situations that remind them of a past traumatic event.

By talking about your trauma repeatedly with a therapist, you'll learn to get control of your thoughts and feelings about the trauma. You'll learn that you do not have to be afraid of your memories. This may be

hard at first. It might seem strange to think about stressful things on purpose. But you'll feel less overwhelmed over time.

With the help of your therapist, you can change how you react to the stressful memories. Talking in a place where you feel secure makes this easier.

You may focus on memories that are less upsetting before talking about worse ones. This is called "desensitization," and it allows you to deal with bad memories a little bit at a time. Your therapist also may ask you to remember a lot of bad memories at once. This is called "flooding," and it helps you learn not to feel overwhelmed.

You also may practice different ways to relax when you're having a stressful memory. Breathing exercises are sometimes used for this.

### **What is EMDR?**

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) is another type of therapy for PTSD. Like other kinds of counseling, it can help change how you react to memories of your trauma.

While thinking of or talking about your memories, you'll focus on other stimuli like eye movements, hand taps, and sounds. For example, your therapist will move his or her hand near your face, and you'll follow this movement with your eyes.

Experts are still learning how EMDR works. Studies have shown that it may help you have fewer PTSD symptoms. But research also suggests that the eye movements are not a necessary part of the treatment.

### **Medication**

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are a type of antidepressant medicine. These can help you feel less sad and worried. They appear to be helpful, and for some people they are very effective. SSRIs include citalopram (Celexa), fluoxetine (such as Prozac), paroxetine (Paxil), and sertraline (Zoloft).

Chemicals in your brain affect the way you feel. When you have depression you may not have enough of a chemical called serotonin. SSRIs raise the level of serotonin in your brain.

There are other medications that have been used with some success. Talk to your doctor about which medications are right for you.

## **Other types of treatment**

In addition to CBT and SSRIs, some other kinds of counseling may be helpful in your recovery from PTSD.

### **Group therapy**

Many people want to talk about their trauma with others who have had similar experiences.

In group therapy, you talk with a group of people who also have been through a trauma and who have PTSD. Sharing your story with others may help you feel more comfortable talking about your trauma. This can help you cope with your symptoms, memories, and other parts of your life.

Group therapy helps you build relationships with others who understand what you've been through. You learn to deal with emotions such as shame, guilt, anger, rage, and fear. Sharing with the group also can help you build self-confidence and trust. You'll learn to focus on your present life, rather than feeling overwhelmed by the past.

## Brief psychodynamic psychotherapy

In this type of therapy, you learn ways of dealing with emotional conflicts caused by your trauma. This therapy helps you understand how your past affects the way you feel now.

Your therapist can help you:

- Identify what triggers your stressful memories and other symptoms.
- Find ways to cope with intense feelings about the past.
- Become more aware of your thoughts and feelings, so you can change your reactions to them.
- Raise your self-esteem.

## Family therapy

PTSD can impact your whole family. Your kids or your partner may not understand why you get angry sometimes, or why you're under so much stress. They may feel scared, guilty, or even angry about your condition.

Family therapy is a type of counseling that involves your whole family. A therapist helps you and your family communicate, maintain good relationships, and cope with tough emotions. Your family can learn more about PTSD and how it is treated.

In family therapy, each person can express his or her fears and concerns. It's important to be honest about your feelings and to listen to others. You can talk about your PTSD symptoms and what triggers them. You also can discuss the important parts of your treatment and recovery. By doing this, your family will be better prepared to help you.

You may consider having individual therapy for your PTSD symptoms and family therapy to help you with your relationships.

## How long does treatment last?

Some people are in treatment for PTSD for 3 to 6 months. If you have other mental health problems as well as PTSD, treatment for PTSD may last for 1 to 2 years or longer.

## What if someone has PTSD and another disorder? Is the treatment different?

It is very common to have PTSD at that same time as another mental health problem. Depression, alcohol or substance abuse problems, panic disorder, and other anxiety disorders often occur along with PTSD. In many cases, the PTSD treatments described above will also help with the other disorders. The best treatment results occur when both PTSD and the other problems are treated together rather than one after the other.

## How do I find a therapist?

There are many ways to find a therapist. You can start by asking friends and family if they can recommend anyone. Be aware, though, that someone else's therapist might not have skills in treating trauma survivors.

Another way to locate a therapist is to make some phone calls. When you call, say that you are trying to find a provider who specializes in helping trauma survivors.

- Contact your local mental health agency or family doctor.

- Call your state psychological association
- Call the psychology department at a local college
- Call the National Center for Victims of Crime's toll-free information and referral service at 1-800-FYI-CALL. This service uses agencies from across the country that support crime victims.
- If you work for a large company, call the human resources office to see if they make referrals.
- If you are a member of a Health Maintenance Organization (HMO), call to find out about mental health services.

Some mental health services are listed in the phone book. In the blue Government pages, look in the "County Government Offices" section. In that section, look for "Health Services (Dept. of)" or "Department of Health Services." Then in that section, look under "Mental Health."

In the yellow pages, therapists are listed under "counseling," "psychologists," "social workers," "psychotherapists," "social and human services," or "mental health."

Information can also be found using the Internet. You may find a list of therapists in your area. Some lists include the therapists' areas of practice. Listed below are some suggested websites:

- [Center for Mental Health Services Locator](#). This services locator is on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) website. The site also provides a [Frequently Asked Questions](#) about mental health. (<http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/databases>)
- [Anxiety Disorders Association of America](#)\* offers a referral network. ([www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)) (240-485-1001)
- [ABCT Find a Therapist Service](#)\*. The Association for Advancement of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies (ABCT, formerly AABT) maintains a database of therapists. ([www.abct.org](http://www.abct.org))
- [Sidran](#)\* offers a referral list of therapists, as well as a fact sheet on how to choose a therapist for PTSD and dissociative disorders. ([www.sidran.org](http://www.sidran.org)) (410-825-8888)

Your health insurance may pay for mental health services. Also, some services are available at low cost according to your ability to pay.

## Choosing a therapist

There are a many things to consider in choosing a therapist. Some practical issues are location, cost, and what insurance the therapist accepts. Other issues include the therapist's background, training, and the way he or she works with people.

Some people meet with a few therapists before deciding which one to work with. Most, however, try to see someone known in their area. Then they go with that person unless a problem occurs. Either way, here is a list of questions you may want to ask a possible therapist.

- What is your education? Are you licensed? How many years have you been practicing?
- What are your special areas of practice?
- Have you ever worked with people who have been through trauma? Do you have any special training in PTSD treatment?

- What kinds of PTSD treatments do you use? Have they been proven effective for dealing with my kind of problem or issue?
- What are your fees? (Fees are usually based on a 45-minute to 50-minute session.) Do you have any discounted fees? How much therapy would you recommend?
- What types of insurance do you accept? Do you file insurance claims? Do you contract with any managed care organizations? Do you accept Medicare or Medicaid insurance?

### **What can I expect from my therapist?**

When you begin therapy, you and your therapist should decide together what goals you hope to reach in therapy. Not every person with PTSD will have the same treatment goals. For instance, not all people with PTSD are focused on reducing their symptoms.

Some people want to learn the best way to live with their symptoms and how to cope with other problems associated with PTSD. Perhaps you want to feel less guilt and sadness? Perhaps you would like to work on improving your relationships at work, or communication issues with your friends and family.

Your therapist should help you decide which of these goals seems most important to you, and he or she should discuss with you which goals might take a long time to achieve.

Your therapist should give you a good explanation for the therapy. You should understand why your therapist is choosing a specific treatment for you, how long they expect the therapy to last, and how they see if it is working.

The two of you should agree at the beginning that this plan makes sense for you and what you will do if it does not seem to be working. If you have any questions about the treatment your therapist should be able to answer them.

You should feel comfortable with your therapist and feel you are working as a team to tackle your problems. It can be difficult to talk about painful situations in your life, or about traumatic experiences that you have had. Feelings that emerge during therapy can be scary and challenging. Talking with your therapist about the process of therapy, and about your hopes and fears in regards to therapy, will help make therapy successful.

If you do not like your therapist or feel that the therapist is not helping you, it might be helpful to talk with another professional. In most cases, you should tell your therapist that you are seeking a second opinion.