

Treatments for PTSD

Several treatment options are available for people experiencing symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress. Whether it is individual, group, pharmacotherapy (medication) or a combination of these, treatment has been proven to be effective much of the time and can help a person get back to their regular routines and healthy functioning.

Types of treatment

Individual Psychotherapy

This involves meeting one on one with a licensed Psychologist, Social Worker or Mental Health Counselor. Typically these meetings are once a week for an hour and focus on talking about the events, your reactions to them and means of mitigating the effects on your life. The types of modalities therapists use may include:

Behavioral or Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

This treatment approach looks at ways in which a person thinks about a problem, their learned responses to certain triggers associated with that problem and ways in which their thinking affects their emotional state. This treatment often uses a combination of exposure (deliberately thinking about an event or confronting a trigger) and relaxation training along with cognitive restructuring or changing one's thoughts or beliefs about an event or trigger. This process tends to "desensitize" a person's response to reminders of the event so that it no longer carries the same emotional impact. CBT has been well researched and has been shown to be an effective treatment for PTSD.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

This treatment modality uses exposure to the traumatic memory paired with "bilateral stimulation" of the brain by tracking the therapist's finger or string of lights with the eyes or listening to alternating tones. Current thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and beliefs are activated and the tracking helps to reduce emotional and physiological reaction to the memory. This desensitization helps the person to reprocess their negative beliefs about themselves (for example "It was my fault") to adaptive, healthy and more accurate beliefs ("I did the best I could"). There have been numerous studies on EMDR over the past fifteen or more years and it has been shown to be a rapid and effective treatment for PTSD.

Group therapy

Group therapy can be very helpful following a traumatic event as it provides a safe and supportive environment in which to discuss a shared experience with others. There is often a felt sense that "nobody understands" and a group can help you to feel less alienated, normalizing your reactions to an abnormal event.

Medication

People are often very leery of about medication feeling it signifies that they are "crazy" or out of control. This is, of course, not the case and many people take medication for varying lengths of time following particularly stressful life events. Traumatic events can influence the neurochemistry of the body and brain impacting a person in many ways. Excessive stress hormones can make it difficult to concentrate, relax or even sleep. They can increase blood pressure, muscle tension, skin conductance and general arousal levels. It can impair immune system functioning, making people more vulnerable to illness. Fairly often these changes can lead to depression or anxiety. Medication can be effective in resetting the levels in the brain and may prove to be very helpful for a period of time. Some types of medication may include:

This resource guide was produced at the Trauma Center, with the funding of the Massachusetts Office for Victim Assistance (MOVA), under a federal Anti-Terrorism Supplemental Grant (ATSG) to aid Victims of and Responders to the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks. It is not intended to

Anxiolytic (Anti-anxiety) Medication. Include medications such as Xanax or Ativan. These tend to be short lasting medications that help to reduce physiological and emotional arousal and irritability associated with PTSD.

Antidepressants. These are medications such as Prozac, Paxil or Zoloft. Research has shown these medications to be effective in helping to reduce overall PTSD symptoms including irritability, depressed or anxious moods, anger, impulsivity and obsessive thoughts.

Adrenergic agents. This class of medication includes Propranolol and Clonidine. These act on the adrenal system and help to lower overall arousal levels, control intrusive images, memories and nightmares.

There are many variables to consider in one's decision to take or forego medication and only a medical doctor can prescribe them. A consultation with a psychiatrist can help to provide you with the information necessary to make an informed choice in this matter. Remember, the choice to take medication is always up to you.

Finally, in choosing a treatment provider for any of the treatments listed above you want to know certain things about the person you will be seeing. A good therapeutic relationship is very important to positive outcome in therapy. You will find a referral source in the links page, and when you contact someone ask them several questions about their training and experience in the field of traumatic stress including:

- What is your formal training background?
- What specific training have you had in the area of trauma?
- How long have you been doing this work and with how many people?
- What is your treatment philosophy and approach (methods)?
- How will we know when we are finished?

As a client in a therapy relationship you have the right to be involved in treatment planning and to set your own goals for the treatment.