

UNDERSTANDING PTSD AND C-PTSD

A closer look at the long-term impacts of trauma

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While most of us have heard the terms Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), we are completely unaware of the causes, symptoms, and treatments for these disorders.

Key Messages

- **Traumatic or distressing experiences can change how the brain responds to threats.**
 - **Contrary to what many people assume, anyone could develop PTSD in the aftermath of a traumatic event**
 - **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is rooted in a single traumatic event, while Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD) is linked to repeated traumatic experiences**
 - **Today, there are highly effective, evidence-based treatments for both PTSD and C-PTSD**
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In movies and on TV, individuals with PTSD are often depicted as dangerous, incurable, and violent military veterans who have been exposed to the horrors of active combat. The reality is that anyone can develop PTSD in the aftermath of trauma. Let's look at the effect of trauma on the brain, the similarities, [differences](#), and effective treatments for [PTSD](#) and [C-PTSD](#).

The effect of trauma on the brain

Traumatic or distressing experiences can change the way the brain responds to threats. Trauma essentially shuts down the neuropathways between the [amygdala](#) — the part of the brain that harbors trauma but is unable to process it — and the [prefrontal cortex](#), the part of the brain that can process it. When this happens, victims of trauma can remain stuck and unable to process and recover from a distressing event or series of events. This leaves those struggling in the aftermath of trauma stuck in a hopeless cycle, unable to move beyond their experiences. While recovery from Complex PTSD can take significant time, attention, and effort, there are effective treatments available.

PTSD: rooted in a single traumatic experience

PTSD is linked to a single event or experience, or a series of related events. It is rooted in a real-life traumatic experience or

an exposure to actual or threatened sudden death, serious injury, violent assault, sexual violence, or a serious injury or sudden, unexpected death of a loved one. PTSD can also occur after witnessing first-hand or experiencing a traumatic, life-threatening event, such as a natural disaster, a serious car accident or plane crash, a physical or sexual assault, combat or war-zone exposure.

C-PTSD linked to repeated traumatic experiences

C-PTSD results from longer-term exposure to a traumatic situation. It involves prolonged, repeated experiences — often in childhood — of emotional, physical or sexual abuse, domestic violence, or neglect. Prolonged exposure to traumatic situations later in life, for example, being a victim of human trafficking, living in a war zone with no hope of escape, or being a victim of torture, are also linked to Complex PTSD.

Common symptoms

Both PTSD and Complex PTSD sufferers may be plagued with intrusive and upsetting memories and/or dreams. Unlike recalling

memories, they may experience distressing [flashbacks](#), and feel at times that they are in life-threatening danger. They may suffer momentary or prolonged distress when exposed to a trigger — that is to say, a reminder — of their trauma. Triggers may be subtle, like a sound, a smell, or a sight that reminds them of some element of their traumatic experience or experiences — and might set off distressing psychological reactions. They may have great difficulty concentrating and sleeping, and feel isolated, alone, and unsafe in the world.

Symptoms of C-PTSD

C-PTSD sufferers also struggle with low [self-esteem](#) and strong negative self-identity. They often harbor a deep sense of shame and blame themselves for what they have been through. They often protect the person who abused or neglected them, particularly when that person was responsible for their care at an early age. They feel helpless and unable to make their way in the world. Complex PTSD sufferers may struggle to establish healthy relationships, due to their prior exposure to unhealthy relationships and an inability to control negative emotions. They may deeply mistrust others and avoid relationships altogether. They struggle with feelings of deep despair and feel isolated

and helpless. They often abuse alcohol or drugs.

Effective treatments


While sufferers of PTSD and C-PTSD are often depicted as incurable, the reality is that there are highly effective, evidence-based treatments available. Treatments for PTSD and C-PTSD include Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT). A tremendously effective form of therapy for sufferers of Complex PTSD is Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). EMDR opens neuropathways between the part of the brain that is unable to process trauma and the part of the brain that can do so. EMDR is proven to greatly relieve, reduce or remove psychological stress. Leading trauma experts, including Bessel A. Van der Kolk, MD, [regard](#) emerging studies and clinical trials around the development of MDMA-assisted therapies for treating PTSD and C-PTSD as highly promising and effective.

As a clinical psychologist specializing in treating trauma, I know that when we process our trauma, we can move beyond our pain and suffering and live a full and happier life. If you, or someone close to you, suffers from PTSD, there is no time like the present to begin to heal and create a healthier, happier future.

If you believe...that you may be experiencing symptoms of PTSD or C-PTSD, there is no time like the present to begin to heal.

Start by:

- Confiding in a trusted friend who can support you while you connect with the resources you need
- Consulting your doctor or a primary care physician
- Seeking the support of your insurance provider if you have employee benefits



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About the author

Dr. Monica Vermani is a Clinical Psychologist specializing in treating trauma, stress and mood & anxiety disorders, and the founder of Start Living Corporate Wellness. She is a well-known speaker, columnist and advocate in the field of mental health and wellness.

Her book, A Deeper Wellness, is currently available for pre-sale on

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