



Treatments for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a medical condition that affects a person's thoughts, feelings and behaviors. There are many treatments available; however, the most common treatments are psychotherapy and/or medication. Psychotherapy, also known as talk therapy, is a treatment in which people work with trained behavioral health providers to discuss their problems and learn new skills. While there are a variety of psychotherapies available to treat PTSD, some have been proven to be more effective than others. There are also several medications that are effective in treating PTSD. This handout provides basic information on treatments recommended as most effective by the VA/DoD clinical practice guideline for PTSD.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)

Cognitive behavioral therapy for PTSD is usually a structured, short-term treatment that has four main components:

- 1) Cognitive therapy
- 2) Exposure therapy
- 3) Relaxation techniques
- 4) Education about PTSD

Cognitive therapy (CT) is based on the idea that our thinking patterns influence our emotions. Cognitive therapy involves identifying and changing problematic thinking patterns and beliefs which cause anxiety, such as beliefs about danger a person may have since living through a trauma. For example, if you believe that people want to harm you, you might be very uncomfortable in crowds or other public areas where you can't watch everyone.

Exposure therapy (ET) is based on the idea that we learn to fear situations and things that were associated with a trauma. We also usually avoid these situations and things, even trying not to think about them. Exposure therapy involves thinking about or actually being in situations which trigger anxiety reactions, such as being near a crowd. After repeatedly picturing these situations or being in them, the situations gradually lose their ability to trigger anxiety.

Relaxation techniques are usually included in CBT for PTSD and involve learning and practicing techniques that have been shown to lower your anxiety or stress levels. Several techniques such as meditation, progressive muscle relaxation or deep breathing exercises have been proven to reduce anxiety. Using these techniques will help to keep your anxiety level down and make it easier to complete other parts of CBT.

Education about PTSD usually involves learning about the disorder, including the symptoms, theories about what causes PTSD, information on how to cope with reactions you're experiencing and what treatments have been shown to be effective.

How much time does it take?

A usual course of CBT for PTSD lasts about eight to 20 sessions but can vary based on the specific type of therapy.

Who does this therapy?

This type of therapy should be conducted by a trained provider and is usually available at behavioral health clinics.

Who does it work for?

Cognitive behavioral therapy has been proven to be an effective treatment in adults with PTSD.

What are some types of CBT for PTSD?

There are several variations on cognitive behavioral therapy which generally have four main components, but some of these therapy protocols emphasize one of the components more than others. For example, prolonged exposure emphasizes gaining exposure to fear-provoking memories or situations but also involves identifying and changing thinking patterns.

- Cognitive therapy
- Cognitive processing therapy
- Prolonged exposure therapy
- Eye movement desensitization and reprogramming



Evidence-Based Treatments

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapies
 - Cognitive therapy
 - Cognitive processing therapy
 - Prolonged exposure therapy
 - Eye movement reprogramming & desensitization
 - Stress inoculation training
- Medications



Variations on Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for PTSD

Eye movement desensitization and reprogramming (EMDR) has been proven to be an effective treatment for PTSD. Eye movement desensitization and reprogramming involves following an object with your eyes while describing a memory of a trauma. The alternating eye movements have been shown to be largely unnecessary; however, many believe that EMDR works because it involves exposure therapy.

Stress inoculation training (SIT) is designed to inoculate people from having heightened anxiety reactions by learning several anxiety management skills. Stress inoculation training will usually involve many of the following components: education on coping skills, assertiveness training, role playing, relaxation techniques and thought stopping. Stress inoculation training for PTSD will also have some exposure therapy exercises as well as learning to modify thoughts and beliefs that cause anxiety.

How much time does it take?

A usual course of EMDR or SIT will last eight to 15 sessions.

Who does this therapy?

Both EMDR and SIT should be conducted by a trained behavioral health provider and may be available in behavioral health clinics.

Who does it work for?

Both EMDR and SIT have been proven to be effective treatments in adults with PTSD.

Medications for PTSD

There are several types of medications that are commonly used to treat PTSD.

Anti-depressant medications: Anti-depressants have been used to effectively treat a variety of anxiety disorders, including PTSD. The anti-depressants with the most evidence in helping patients with PTSD are the Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRI) Zoloft, Paxil, Prozac and the Serotonin/Norepinephrine Reuptake Inhibitor (SNRI) Effexor.

Anti-psychotics: This type of medication is usually used to treat disorders like schizophrenia. However, they are also used in PTSD as an adjunctive medication (usually used in combination with an SSRI/SNRI).

Benzodiazepines: These medications are used to help people with sleep and anxiety. However, they are not recommended for use in PTSD (especially combat veterans). They can cause side effects such as sedation and memory problems and may worsen PTSD for some types of patients. There is also a risk of becoming dependent on these medications so they should be used sparingly within PTSD.

How much time does it take?

The time frame for medications to start working and the duration for taking them depends on the type of medication and the severity of the person's PTSD.

Who prescribes medications for PTSD?

Anti-depressants can be prescribed by primary care managers or by psychiatrists in behavioral health clinics. Other types of medications can be prescribed by PCMs as well; however, they are more likely to be prescribed by specialists.

Who does it work for?

Anti-depressants are effective for treating adults with PTSD.

References: Department of Veterans Affairs & Department of Defense (2010). VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guidelines for the Management of Post-Traumatic Stress. Retrieved from www.healthquality.va.gov **Photo Credit:** US Army photo Pfc. Luke Rollins