

The background features a vibrant, abstract design. On the left, there is a dense cluster of colorful splatters in shades of red, orange, yellow, and green. To the right, there are more splatters in shades of blue and purple. A large, dark blue, curved shape overlaps the bottom right corner of the image, containing the title and author information. A thin, light-colored curved line also spans across the bottom right area.

# Complex Trauma and PTSD for Families of Children with Complex Needs

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# What is trauma?

- **Trauma** is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, act of violence or disaster.
- Trauma is a deeply disturbing event that infringes upon an individual's sense of control and may reduce their capacity to integrate the situation or circumstances into their current reality.

## Big T and Small t trauma

Small 't' traumas for the most part would not lead to the development of pure PTSD symptoms, it is possible that a person can develop some trauma response symptoms. Examples: Interpersonal conflict, Infidelity, Divorce, Abrupt or extended relocation, Legal trouble, Financial worries or difficulty

One small 't' trauma may not lead to significant distress, but multiple compounded small 't' traumas, particularly in a short span of time, are more likely to lead to an increase in distress and trouble with emotional functioning.

## Big T and Small t trauma (cont)

A large-T trauma is distinguished as an extraordinary and significant event that leaves the individual feeling powerless and possessing little control in their environment.

Examples: natural disaster, terrorist attack, sexual assault, combat, a car or plane accident, etc.

One large 'T' trauma is often enough to cause severe distress and interfere with an individual's daily functioning, and this effect is intensified the longer avoidance behaviors endure and treatment is circumvented.

# Trauma related diagnosis

- Adjustment Disorder or Acute Stress Disorder
  - When someone has experienced trauma, has some trauma related symptoms but does not meet criteria for PTSD
  - Usually a short term diagnosis (less than 6 months)
- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
  - Client must meet specific criteria to qualify for this diagnosis

# Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

## **Criterion A: stressor (one required)**

- The person was exposed to: death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence, in the following way(s):
- Direct exposure
- Witnessing the trauma
- Learning that a relative or close friend was exposed to a trauma
- Indirect exposure to aversive details of the trauma, usually in the course of professional duties (e.g., first responders, medics)

## **Criterion B: intrusion symptoms (one required)**

- The traumatic event is persistently re-experienced in the following way(s):
- Unwanted upsetting memories
- Nightmares
- Flashbacks
- Emotional distress after exposure to traumatic reminders
- Physical reactivity after exposure to traumatic reminders

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**Criterion C: avoidance (one required)**

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Avoidance of trauma-related stimuli after the trauma, in the following way(s):

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Trauma-related thoughts or feelings

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Trauma-related external reminders (Triggers)

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**Criterion D: negative alterations in cognitions and mood (two required)**

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Negative thoughts or feelings that began or worsened after the trauma, in the following way(s):

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Inability to recall key features of the trauma

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Overly negative thoughts and assumptions about oneself or the world

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Exaggerated blame of self or others for causing the trauma

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Negative affect

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Decreased interest in activities

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Feeling isolated

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Difficulty experiencing positive affect

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**Criterion E: alterations in arousal and reactivity**

- Trauma-related arousal and reactivity that began or worsened after the trauma, in the following way(s):
- Irritability or aggression
- Risky or destructive behavior
- Hypervigilance
- Difficulty concentrating
- Difficulty sleeping

**Criterion F: duration (required)**

- Symptoms last for more than 1 month.

**Criterion G: functional significance (required)**

- Symptoms create distress or functional impairment (e.g., social, occupational).



# Trauma reactions



## **Fight**

Response: Attack,  
Confront, Dominate

Emotion: Anger,  
Irritable



## **Flight**

Response: Run, Hide,  
Quit

Emotion: Denial,  
Anxiety



## **Freeze**

Response: Comply,  
Surrender

Emotion: Shutdown,  
Empty, Numb

# Complex Trauma

Complex trauma refers to a series of traumatic events that take place over a long period of time, like months or years.

- sexual abuse or incest
- ongoing physical or emotional abuse
- chronic neglect or abandonment
- medical abuse or medical trauma
- torture or being held captive
- parentification (children taking on adult roles)
- human trafficking
- genocide campaigns
- living in a war zone or area of civil unrest

# Symptoms of Complex Trauma

- flashbacks
- lapses in memory
- difficulty regulating emotions
- hyperarousal, or being “on alert”
- dissociation or lapses in memory
- depersonalization or derealization
- sleep disturbances or nightmares
- struggling in interpersonal relationships
- low self-esteem or negative self-perception
- avoiding people, places, or scenarios that upset you
- Somatic (bodily) symptoms, like unexplained headaches or an upset stomach, are also common with complex trauma.
- Chronic stress can lower your immune system and lead to a range of chronic health conditions.



# Recovery from Complex Trauma and PTSD

**Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT).** In this form of therapy, you explore the relationship between your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Once you become aware of the connections, you may be able to change your actions.

**Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR).** Bilateral Dual Attention Stimulus used to assist Client to reprocess traumatic events and form new beliefs around them.

**Internal family systems (IFS).** With this approach, you learn how to integrate the different parts of your personality into one whole "Self" to reprocess traumatic events in a way that can no longer harm you.

## Recovery from Complex Trauma and PTSD (cont)

**Somatic (body) therapies.** Since trauma lives in the limbic area of the brain and not the frontal cortex (the part of the brain that talks in therapy), somatic therapies or body-centered therapies can teach your body that it does not have to be prepared for trauma all the time.

**Dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT).** This approach can be effective for people who live with borderline personality disorder (BPD), which has many overlapping symptoms with complex trauma. In this treatment approach, you learn mindfulness, radical self-acceptance, and distress tolerance.



## Self Care is imperative in recovering from Trauma

- journal your feelings
- spend time in nature
- eat a nutritious, balanced diet
- Get good sleep, sleep enough, do not oversleep
- talk through your triggers with loved ones
- practice progressive relaxation techniques, yoga, mindfulness meditation
- exercise regularly

# Helpful reading about Trauma

- "The Body Keeps the Score" by Bessel van der Kolk, MD
- "Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors: Overcoming Internal Self-Alienation" by Janina Fisher, PhD
- "Trauma & Recovery" by Judith Lewis Herman, MD
- "The Complex PTSD Workbook" by Arielle Schwartz, PhD
- "Waking the Tiger" by Peter Levine, PhD
- "Trauma and the Body" by Pat Ogden, PhD
- "The Body Heals Itself" by Emily Francis
- "What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing" by Bruce D. Perry, MD, PhD, and Oprah Winfrey



# Guided Imagery





Questions?



Thank You!

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