

Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – C-PTSD Information for Patients and Professionals

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It has been known for a long time that various forms of emotional adversity - abuse, neglect or severe ongoing stress in childhood (such as bullying at school) lead to people developing patterns of emotions, thinking and behaviour which can make their lives very difficult and unhappy. For example:

- If other people do bad things to you as a child you may learn that you cannot be in control of what happened to you and you stop planning ahead, making decisions for yourself and you do not learn to solve problems you face in life. This makes life very difficult and makes more bad things happen. It can also mean it is hard to focus on and achieve long term goals.
- When children are trapped in stressful or traumatic situations and cannot get away from them, their brain learns to escape mentally by switching off or “dissociating”. Another way of mentally escaping is to go into a fantasy world in various ways, making up a different reality or imagining things that only you can see or hear.
- If you have had bad experiences or been badly treated as a child you may learn not to trust other people. You may build up barriers around yourself and do not let people get too close. This makes it difficult to have good relationships. Often the only people who break through your barriers are controlling or abusive.
- If you learnt as a child that suddenly very bad things can happen to you, it teaches you to be on the lookout for danger, always on edge or anxious and very jumpy.
- This makes you react very strongly to everyday problems. Normal life is full of little problems so these strong reactions can make your emotions, your thinking and what you do very changeable and extreme. It is like having a very thin emotional skin.
- Because this extreme distress is very painful it can lead people to look for anything that will make the feelings go away, for example taking drugs, drinking alcohol, causing physical pain to drown the mental pain (often by cutting), or by just shutting off mentally (we call this “dissociation”). This means it can be hard to feel good about yourself or have a secure sense of self-identity.

Is this just the way I am and cannot be changed?

People who have these difficulties and often the people around them, including professionals may think that this is just the way they are and they cannot be changed. This is not true. An important first step is recognising what this problem is because it is often misunderstood and therefore the wrong treatment is given. Recognising the problem is often difficult, because people with this are much more vulnerable to other difficulties such as depression and because these symptoms are very like the symptoms of anxiety and depression. This means that people have often had lots of different diagnoses and sometimes have found that the treatments they have had have not helped, or have only helped a bit.

In order to recognise these patterns and to change them, it is useful to give them a name but many different names have been used, which is confusing.

Why so many different names for this problem?

In the past, and still quite commonly now, the term “Borderline Personality Disorder” was used. This name originally developed because people thought this problem was “bordering on psychotic” because of the voices that sufferers commonly describe. After this the term “Emotionally Unstable Personality Disorder” started to be used more commonly. This better

describes the very unstable emotions, but says nothing about where the problems come from. The suggestion that the symptoms are just part of the sufferer's personality is not correct and is in itself harmful, as they are understandable reactions to traumatic experiences, and they reduce over time and even faster with treatment.

Most recently, researchers have come to understand how these patterns come from abuse, stress or trauma in childhood and how similar the patterns are to people who suffer trauma in adulthood, for example soldiers in war situations. The pattern of problems they get, which is very similar, is called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). So we now call these problems "Complex PTSD".

What treatments are available?

The major difficulties in life and the distress that C-PTSD causes can be reduced by addressing the rapid and extreme changes in thinking and behaviour and replacing these with more regular steady routines, thinking ahead and predicting difficulties and more helpful ways of dealing with thoughts and situations. The first step in learning to change this is getting good at recognising the unhelpful patterns. After that, there are techniques you can learn that will help change these patterns. Some of these techniques are called **Emotional Coping Skills**. These are best learnt in a group situation with other people who have the same difficulties and are learning the same techniques. This is often very difficult for people with C-PTSD and, to start with, you may need to work with an individual professional to help you get ready for learning in a group. A more intense therapy which teaches the same emotional coping skills is called **Dialectic Behaviour Therapy (DBT)**. This is also done individually and in a group and can be extremely effective in helping people achieve major change and improvement in the quality of their lives. This sort of therapy is usually only available from specialist mental health services. There also some evidence that a treatment called EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing) can be helpful for C-PTSD.

Why is it important to recognise C-PTSD and treat it?

C-PTSD causes a lot of disability and suffering, not just for people who suffer from it but for other people around them. This makes it very important to recognise this problem and to work hard at trying to overcome the associated difficulties. The sooner this is done, the less likely it is to cause damage to somebody's life and it is probably also easier to deal with it, but whenever you start trying to deal with it, it is likely to be difficult. Even so, it is definitely worth it as it can make life so much better.

If you want to read more:

Have a look at this website: <http://www.outofthestorm.website>

and this book is quite long and a bit technical in places but very good: *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* By Bessel van der Kolk. Penguin Books