

Trauma & Post-traumatic Stress Disorder:

Experiencing a death, divorce, abuse, serious accidents, sexual violence, terror, or catastrophic events can be experienced as trauma. It can cause a powerful psychological response that everyone can experience differently, at varying levels of magnitude. The expression of symptoms can be immediate, or delayed, and the effects can be short or long term.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event or prolonged trauma. For example, combat veterans or first responders who are exposed to repeated life threatening incidents can develop PTSD symptoms. Similarly, individuals exposed to home or community violence are also at risk for developing PTSD symptoms. In two national epidemiological studies, lifetime PTSD prevalence estimates ranged from 6.1% to 8.3% (American Psychiatric Association DSM-5-TR, 2022). PTSD is more prevalent among women across the lifespan, with estimates ranging from 8% to 11% for women compared to 4.1% to 5.4% for men (based on two large U.S. population-based studies; American Psychiatric Association DSM-5-TR, 2022).

Survivors of PTSD have powerful negative thoughts and feelings that can last long after the traumatic event has occurred. Flashbacks, depression, anger, fear and the feelings of detachment or estrangement are all part of experienced symptoms. Survivors can exhibit Exaggerated or startled reactions to ordinary touch or sound. These symptoms can cause distress and disruption to one's life and quality of one's relationships.



Amygdala Hijack: The prefrontal cortex is involved in “executive functions” such as planning, impulse control, judgement and decision making, setting goals, and impulse control. The prefrontal cortex is part of the neocortex. The neocortex is what differentiates humans from animals. It is the newest part of the brain and the cerebral cortex is the entire outer top part of the brain. The neocortex is where we experience love, reason, optimism, and creativity. The Amygdala is part of the limbic system. It evolved much earlier than the neo-cortex and is responsible for helping us deal with danger. It's responses are flight, fight, freeze or defend. When it is activated, usually as a response to danger, it overpowers the neocortex as the reaction needs to be quicker.

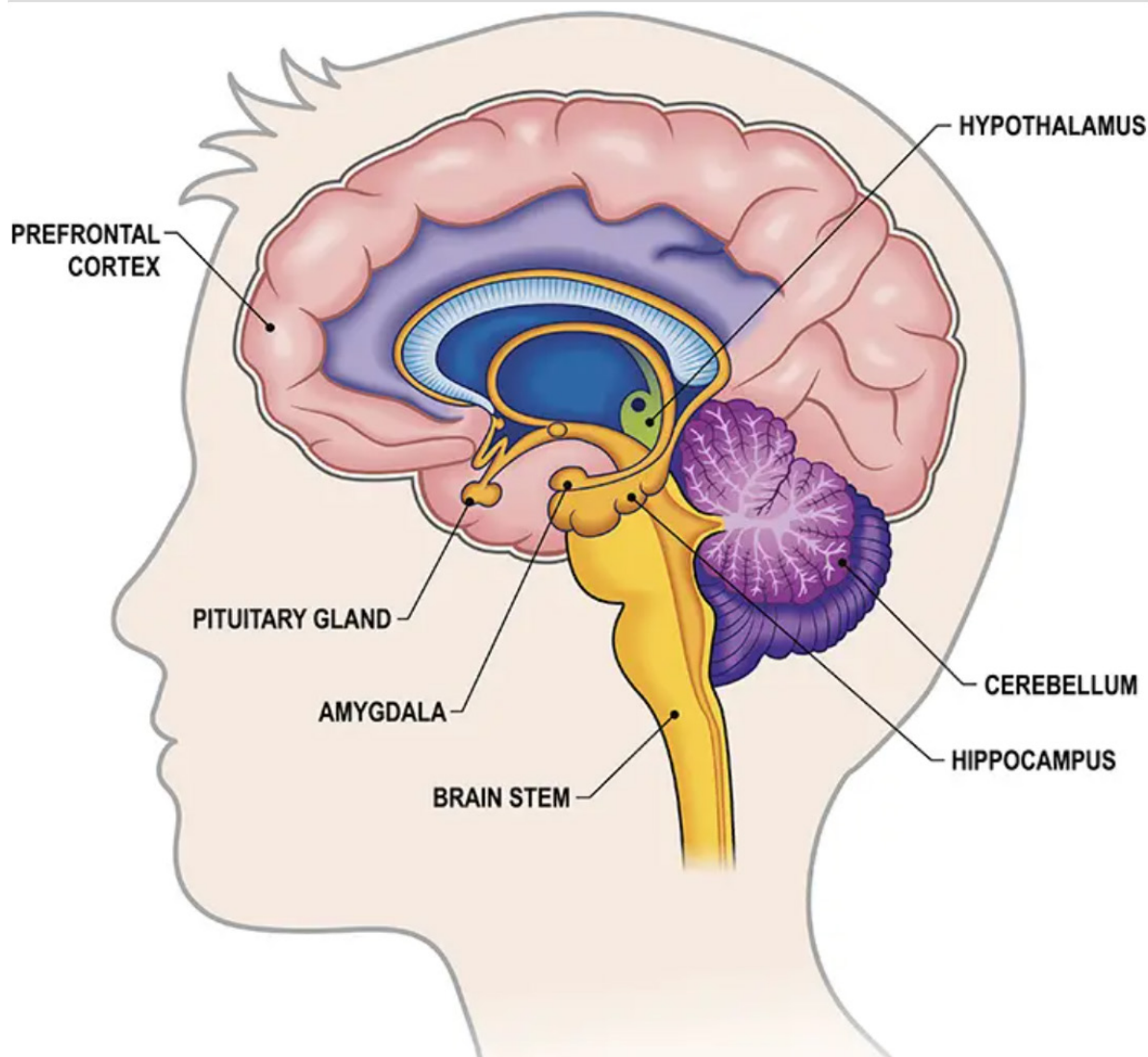
The Amygdala hijacks the neocortex when it is activated and meta-cognition is temporarily suspended for survival purposes. This activation can be in response to information we are exposed to on the news, or social media, though ideology or from trauma. In PTSD, the sustained exposure to trauma causes the amygdala to be at full alert during the entire exposure for survival. This creates a pattern that can be experienced long after the exposure has ended.



Finding Agency: Coping with Trauma and PTSD

PTSD Symptoms (all of the following must be met for diagnostic considerations):

- Exposure to death or serious injury
- Intrusion symptoms e.g. flashbacks, nightmares
- Avoidance e.g., can be compounded with alcohol or other substance use to numb symptoms
- Negative alterations in thoughts and mood e.g., paranoia, anger, depression
- Hyper arousal e.g., sleep problems, anger outbursts, exaggerated startle response



PTSD Treatment

The Gold Standard of PTSD treatment is trauma-informed intervention: Treat the problem.

Principles of a Trauma Informed Approach Include: safety, transparency, trustworthiness, peer support, empowerment of the survivor, integrating cultural or gender issues, and collaboration with groups or individuals or family members also effected by the trauma. A variety of models with the Trauma informed approach exist however, the following are generally recognized by trauma-specific intervention programs:

- The survivor's right to be informed, respected and hopeful regarding their treatment.
- That the symptom of trauma such as substance abuse, depression, anxiety, eating disorders etc are interrelated to the trauma itself.
- Therapeutic collaboration of family, friends and service agencies can provide many benefits to the survivor.

The Trauma Narrative

The trauma narrative is a form of exposure therapy used to help survivors of trauma also reframe the interpretation of traumatic events. This can be a difficult process but helps the survivor reprocess the trauma in order to foster healing and post traumatic growth.

It starts with a review of the facts. Then the survivor adds to the story by adding memories, thoughts and feelings they experienced during their trauma. As the survivor becomes more comfortable telling their story, they become more willing to talk about uncomfortable parts of their experience, permitting the opportunity to reframe and modify the narrative. As the survivor either repeats or reads and rereads their account it becomes easier to discuss and therefore process.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a common and well-supported treatment for PTSD. CBT works by identifying and challenging unhealthy thinking patterns that are a result of trauma. The benefits of CBT can be long-lasting. Please see the separate tip worksheet for further explanation of CBT.

Exposure Therapy

During exposure therapy, the patient is exposed to reminders of their trauma in a gradual and safe way. With enough exposure, the trauma begins to lose its emotional power, and the symptoms diminish. Exposure therapies have extensive research support.

Medication

Medication can assist in symptom alleviation and in some cases medication and psychotherapy combined provide the most effective treatment outcome.

Other Treatments

Many other treatments, including group therapy have been found to be helpful for survivors of trauma.



Self Agency: Healing from Trauma

The treatment of PTSD often requires licensed professionals. Yet, with or without professional help, there is much a survivor of trauma can do to promote trauma healing. Like professional therapy this takes time, hope, and commitment.

At www.optamerican.com we developed “The hierarchy of Agency,” as the necessary steps to regain one’s agency. One can lose their agency through fear or trauma where the amygdala hijack overpowers the neocortex and leaves the individual with an inability to reason or properly use the higher functions of the brain.

Finding Agency: Coping with Trauma and PTSD

The hierarchy of agency relates directly to trauma healing. *These steps to address trauma, grief, and stress include:*

Change your story:

If your story is you are a depressed person, you will remain depressed. If the story you tell yourself is you are a victim, you will remain in a victim mindset. This story can be changed by the words you use and the way you interpret events. Identifying yourself as a survivor instead of a victim changes perspective. But your story is effected by what you watch, who you listen to, and what habits you create. Avoiding overly negative information or influences from toxic people. Substitute information from informative podcasts, books or other information that can empower you and help change your unhealthy story of yourself. (Connection to Hierarchy of Agency: Know the Truth)

Physiological activity influences psychological states:

Metabolic Depression is caused from physiological factors including diet and exercise. Researchers have found that sleep problems, a lack of energy, and physical inactivity may lead to a depressed mood and mood changes. When one decreases physical activity the release of serotonin is limited. Serotonin is a chemical that carries messages between nerve cells in the brain and throughout your body. Serotonin plays a key role in body functions such as mood, sleep, digestion, nausea, wound healing, bone health, blood clotting and sexual desire. The less serotonin released, the more difficult to get up off the couch and participate in activity. A vicious cycle soon begins. Get up and move, exercise, walk are keys to self help. (Connection to Hierarchy of Agency: Be Accountable to Yourself)

Courage over Comfort:

Trust is often difficult for people affected by PTSD. Listening to ideas different from our own or the narrative we have in our mind can cause us to become defensive, upset, or enraged. But vulnerability and humility are key in finding your way out. This takes the support of friends, counselors, spiritual leaders, psychologists, coaches, and mentors. But you need to find someone you can trust and ask for help. (Connection to Hierarchy of Agency: Leverage Power)

Look for Meaning over Happiness:

Often PTSD survivors have difficulty finding meaning. Especially veterans, who experienced a sense of purpose in battle, but upon returning home become disillusioned and lost. People who suffered childhood trauma, can disconnect from people, and feel loneliness, desperation and be without direction and a lack of meaning. Each of us find a different meaning but it is almost always found in 1) who or what you love, 2) what you can create, 3) service, and interestingly, enough, 4) through struggle itself. Viktor Frankl is worth listening to on this point. He is one of the great exemplifications, whose family was murdered by the Nazis, yet he helped others survive the brutal experience of a concentration camp utilizing logotherapy he designed to help suicide victims. (Connection to Hierarchy of Agency: Find Meaning)



We not Me. You Belong:

You are a part of something bigger, something awesome! But sometimes, when we face grief, despair, and loneliness, it is hard to see this. Look around you, find people who are in even worse shape than you. Help those people and you will find connection. It exists for all of us, but only if we're willing to give a piece of ourselves. In giving you will find yourself. (Connection to Hierarchy of Agency: You are Part of Something Awesome)



Love, Letting Go & Forgiveness:

We saved this for last, because it is the most difficult, but also, far and away, can be the most rewarding. We know this recommendation can cause anger in trauma survivors given too early but yet it is so powerful we could not avoid it in this discussion. This is not about giving your power away or offering permission to the perpetrator to harm you and others. It's about our way to let go, to put the past in the past so we can move on with our life and find healing, love, and post traumatic growth. We know first hand stories from veterans, who were imprisoned, tortured daily, beaten, and starved, how the trauma destroyed their lives. It often caused them to self medicate with drugs and alcohol, live life in despair and anger destroying every relationship. We have also seen personal experiences of people who suffered those traumas who found a way to let go, move on and have life-changing experiences. The act of forgiveness is often misunderstood and a unique process for every individual. Forgiveness may even be directed at oneself, e.g., for not saving another person, or responding differently to an event. We have seen in places like Rwanda the power of restorative justice the power of forgiveness even after genocide. We do not underestimate the difficulty, finding love and forgiveness for our enemies, our captors, and people who abused us. We also know for many people this will be a bridge to far. We only know the magic, the transformation that happen from those who did. (Connection to Hierarchy of Agency: Find Power in Love and Connection.)