



## NATIONAL CENTER FOR POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

[NCPTSD Home](#) || [About Us](#) || [Published Materials](#) || [Assessment](#) || [Web Resources](#) || [Press Room](#) || [About](#)

**Specific Information for:** [Veterans & their Families](#) | [Mental Health Care Providers](#) | [Health Care Providers](#)



NATIONAL CENTER FOR PTSD  
**FactSheet**

**i** PTSD INFORMATION

SEARCH

[Advanced Search \(by author, t](#)

## Treatment of PTSD

Today, there are good treatments available for PTSD. When you have PTSD dealing with the past can be hard. Instead of telling others how you feel, you may keep your feelings bottled up. But talking with a therapist you get better.

Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) is one type of counseling. It appears to be the most effective type of treatment for PTSD. There are different types of cognitive behavioral therapies such as cognitive therapy and exposure therapy. There is also a similar kind of therapy called eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) used for PTSD. Medications have also been shown to be effective. A type of drug known as a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI), which is also used for depression, is effective for PTSD.

## Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

### What is cognitive therapy?

In cognitive therapy, your therapist helps you understand and change how you think about your trauma and its aftermath. Your goal is to understand how certain thoughts about your trauma cause you stress and make symptoms worse.

You will learn to identify thoughts about the world and yourself that are making you feel afraid or upset. With the help of your therapist, you will learn to replace these thoughts with more accurate and less distressing thoughts. You also learn ways to cope with feelings such as anger, guilt, and fear.

After a traumatic event, you might blame yourself for things you couldn't have changed. For example, a soldier might feel guilty about decisions he or she had to make during war. Cognitive therapy, a type of CBT, helps you understand that the traumatic event you lived through was not your fault.

### What is exposure therapy?

In exposure therapy your goal is to have less fear about your memories. It is based on the idea that people have fear thoughts, feelings, and situations that remind them of a past traumatic event.

By talking about your trauma repeatedly with a therapist, you'll learn to get control of your thoughts and feelings about the trauma. You'll learn that you do not have to be afraid of your memories. This may be hard at first, but it might seem strange to think about stressful things on purpose. But you'll feel less overwhelmed over time.

With the help of your therapist, you can change how you react to the stressful memories. Talking in a place you feel secure makes this easier.

You may focus on memories that are less upsetting before talking about worse ones. This is called "desensitization" and it allows you to deal with bad memories a little bit at a time. Your therapist also may ask you to remember bad memories at once. This is called "flooding," and it helps you learn not to feel overwhelmed.

You also may practice different ways to relax when you're having a stressful memory. Breathing exercises are sometimes used for this.

### **What is EMDR?**

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) is a fairly new therapy for PTSD. Like other kinds of counseling, it can help change how you react to memories of your trauma.

While talking about your memories, you'll focus on distractions like eye movements, hand taps, and sounds. For example, your therapist will move his or her hand near your face, and you'll follow this movement with your eyes.

Experts are still learning how EMDR works. Studies have shown that it may help you have fewer PTSD symptoms. But research also suggests that the eye movements are not a necessary part of the treatment.

### **Medication**

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are a type of antidepressant medicine. These can help you feel less sad and worried. They appear to be helpful, and for some people they are very effective. SSRIs include citalopram (Celexa), fluoxetine (such as Prozac), paroxetine (Paxil), and sertraline (Zoloft).

Chemicals in your brain affect the way you feel. When you have depression you may not have enough of a chemical called serotonin. SSRIs raise the level of serotonin in your brain.

There are other medications that have been used with some success. Talk to your doctor about which medications are right for you.

## **Other types of treatment**

In addition to CBT and SSRIs, some other kinds of counseling may be helpful in your recovery from PTSD.

### **Group therapy**

Many people want to talk about their trauma with others who have had similar experiences.

In group therapy, you talk with a group of people who also have been through a trauma and who have PTSD. Sharing your story with others may help you feel more comfortable talking about your trauma. This can help you cope with your symptoms, memories, and other parts of your life.

Group therapy helps you build relationships with others who understand what you've been through. You learn to deal with emotions such as shame, guilt, anger, rage, and fear. Sharing with the group also can help you build confidence and trust. You'll learn to focus on your present life, rather than feeling overwhelmed by the past.

### **Brief psychodynamic psychotherapy**

In this type of therapy, you learn ways of dealing with emotional conflicts caused by your trauma. This therapy helps you understand how your past affects the way you feel now.

Your therapist can help you:

- Identify what triggers your stressful memories and other symptoms.
- Find ways to cope with intense feelings about the past.
- Become more aware of your thoughts and feelings, so you can change your reactions to them.
- Raise your self-esteem.

### **Family therapy**

PTSD can impact your whole family. Your kids or your partner may not understand why you get angry or why you're under so much stress. They may feel scared, guilty, or even angry about your condition.

Family therapy is a type of counseling that involves your whole family. A therapist helps you and your family communicate, maintain good relationships, and cope with tough emotions. Your family can learn more about and how it is treated.

In family therapy, each person can express his or her fears and concerns. It's important to be honest about feelings and to listen to others. You can talk about your PTSD symptoms and what triggers them. You also discuss the important parts of your treatment and recovery. By doing this, your family will be better prepared for you.

You may consider having individual therapy for your PTSD symptoms and family therapy to help you with relationships.

### **How long does treatment last?**

For some people, treatment for PTSD can last 3 to 6 months. If you have other mental health problems as well as PTSD, treatment for PTSD may last for 1 to 2 years or longer.

### **What if someone has PTSD and another disorder? Is the treatment different?**

It is very common to have PTSD at the same time as another mental health problem. Depression, alcohol or substance abuse problems, panic disorder, and other anxiety disorders often occur along with PTSD. In many cases, the PTSD treatments described above will also help with the other disorders. The best treatment results occur when both PTSD and the other problems are treated together rather than one after the other.

### **What will we work on in therapy?**

When you begin therapy, you and your therapist should decide together what goals you hope to reach in treatment. Not every person with PTSD will have the same treatment goals. For instance, not all people with PTSD are focused on reducing their symptoms.

Some people want to learn the best way to live with their symptoms and how to cope with other problems with PTSD. Perhaps you want to feel less guilt and sadness? Perhaps you would like to work on improving relationships at work, or communication issues with your friends and family.

Your therapist should help you decide which of these goals seems most important to you, and he or she should discuss with you which goals might take a long time to achieve.

### **What can I expect from my therapist?**

Your therapist should give you a good explanation for the therapy. You should understand why your therapist is choosing a specific treatment for you, how long they expect the therapy to last, and how they see if it is working for you.

The two of you should agree at the beginning that this plan makes sense for you and what you will do if it seem to be working. If you have any questions about the treatment your therapist should be able to answer.

You should feel comfortable with your therapist and feel you are working as a team to tackle your problem. It can be difficult to talk about painful situations in your life, or about traumatic experiences that you have had. That emerge during therapy can be scary and challenging. Talking with your therapist about the process and about your hopes and fears in regards to therapy, will help make therapy successful.

If you do not like your therapist or feel that the therapist is not helping you, it might be helpful to talk with another professional. In most cases, you should tell your therapist that you are seeking a second opinion.

[BACK](#)

## Related Reading

- [NIMH Database of Mental Health Services](#)
- [PTSD facts for health: Referral database](#)
- [Vet Centers](#)
- [Anxiety Disorders Assoc of America Referral Network](#)
- [American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: On PTSD](#)

---

[NCPTSD Home](#) | [About Us](#) | [Published Materials](#) | [Assessment](#) | [Web Resources](#) | [Press Room](#) | [About the Website](#) | [Site Map](#) | [PTSD Information Center](#) | [Veterans](#) | [Mental Health Care Providers](#) | [Health Care Providers](#) | [Researchers](#)

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

**EMAIL - [ncptsd@va.gov](mailto:ncptsd@va.gov)**

**CALL - THE PTSD Information Line at (802) 296-6300**

---

[Español](#) | [VA Forms](#) | [Facilities Locator](#) | [Contact the VA](#) | [Frequently Asked Questions \(FAQs\)](#)  
[Privacy Policy](#) | [Web Policies & Important Links](#) | [Annual Performance and Accountability Report](#)  
[Freedom of Information Act](#) | [Small Business Contacts](#) | [Site Map](#)  
[USA.gov](#) | [White House](#) | [USA Freedom Corps](#)

Reviewed/Updated Date: May 31, 2007