

Prolonged Exposure- What is it?

Prolonged Exposure is:

- An empirically supported treatment for survivors of trauma who are experiencing symptoms of PTSD (see Handout 2). There is an enormous base of scientific evidence for this therapy, which well outperforms medications.
- Typically is 8-12 sessions, 90 minutes each.
- An individual therapy.
- If you have experienced multiple traumatic events, it is possible that treatment will take slightly longer to address various experiences. This is often not necessary, however.

How does it work?

Symptoms of post-traumatic stress are universally experienced in the days and weeks following a traumatic event. However, some people continue to experience symptoms years after a trauma has occurred. Studies suggest that the difference in people who continue to experience PTSD symptoms and those who do not lies with avoidance of thoughts, memories, feelings, or events related to the trauma. When people are able to receive support, emotionally process a trauma, grieve the changes, and confront fears (related to safety, intimacy, etc.), they heal from trauma. However, many people do not receive support, or friends, family, or the authorities directly invalidate their experiences. People may also be instructed, “not to think about it” or “put it out of your mind” by well-meaning individuals. However, this only makes symptoms of PTSD worse. Prolonged exposure reduces symptoms of PTSD through emotional processing of the traumatic event(s). Emotional processing occurs through two main methods:

- In vivo exposures: These are exposures that you do outside of session, with three primary targets:
 - Trauma-related triggers (for example, certain sites or smells that bring on immediate anxiety),
 - People/places/things that you have avoided due to trauma-related beliefs (e.g., such as intimacy or safety related beliefs),
 - Values-consistent activities that you have gotten away from participating in, for any reason.
 - Benefits to in vivo exposures include:
 - Engaging in the things that are important to you and consistent with your values
 - Only objectively safe situations
 - Habituation- decreased distress over time (breaking down the connections in your brain between avoided situations and fight/flight/freeze response)
 - Learning important information about avoided situations
 - Learning important information about your coping abilities
- Narrative exposures: These exposures take place in session, where you recall the trauma event in detail. There are many benefits to doing this painful task:
 - Over time, intrusive memories/thoughts/nightmares decrease dramatically, since you are not pushing away the memory.

Prolonged Exposure – Client Handout 1

- Repeatedly retelling the memory helps you to organize the memory and get new perspective about the trauma.
- Repeated retelling also helps you to differentiate between “remembering” an event and “reliving” an event (as people with PTSD often feel as though the trauma is happening all over again).
- Repeated retelling should result in habituation; that is, decreased distress associated with talking about the memory.
- Repeated retelling also helps you to differentiate between the trauma event and similar events (such as when a person generalizes a fear of assault from all men versus her perpetrator).
- Finally, repeated retelling will give you important information about your ability to cope with difficult emotions. You lived through the event, as difficult as it was. You are a survivor and are more resilient than you know.