

The traumatic stress field has adopted the term “Complex Trauma” to describe the experience of multiple and/or chronic and prolonged, developmentally adverse traumatic events, most often of an interpersonal nature (e.g., sexual or physical abuse, war, community violence) and early-life onset. These exposures often occur within the child’s caregiving system and include physical, emotional, and educational neglect and child maltreatment beginning in early childhood.

— Bessel A. van der Kolk

Complex PTSD (C-PTSD)

A doctor may diagnose complex PTSD when a person has experienced trauma on an ongoing basis. Most frequently, this trauma involves long-term physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.

The following are some examples of trauma that can cause complex PTSD:

- experiencing childhood neglect
- experiencing other types of abuse early in life
- experiencing domestic abuse
- experiencing human trafficking
- being a prisoner of war
- living in a region affected by war

Is Complex PTSD a separate condition?

The International Classification of Diseases (ICD) identifies complex PTSD as a separate condition, though the *DSM-5* currently does not.

Complex PTSD is a relatively recent concept. Because of its variable nature, healthcare professionals may instead diagnose another condition. They may be especially likely to diagnose borderline personality disorder (BPD).

Some researchers have identified areas of substantial overlap between complex PTSD and BPD. However, the conditions may also have differences. Authors of a study from 2014 reported that, for example:

- People with complex PTSD had consistently negative self-conceptions, while people with BPD had self-conceptions that were unstable and changing.
- People with complex PTSD may experience difficulties with relationships. They tend to avoid others and may feel a lack of connection.
- BPD can cause a person to swing between idealizing and undervaluing others, resulting in relationship difficulties.

- It is possible for a person with BPD to also experience complex PTSD, and the combination may result in additional symptoms.

Symptoms

Difficulty sleeping can be a symptom of complex PTSD. A person with complex PTSD may experience symptoms in addition to those that characterize PTSD.

Common symptoms of PTSD and complex PTSD include:

- reliving the trauma through flashbacks and nightmares
- avoiding situations that remind them of the trauma
- dizziness or nausea when remembering the trauma
- hyperarousal, which means being in a continual state of high alert
- the belief that the world is a dangerous place
- a loss of trust in the self or others
- difficulty sleeping or concentrating
- being startled by loud noises

Symptoms of complex PTSD can vary, and they may change over time.

(The symptoms of CPTSD usually include those of PTSD, plus an additional set of symptoms.)

Symptoms of PTSD

Reliving the traumatic experience

This can include having nightmares or flashbacks.

Avoiding certain situations

You might avoid situations or activities, such as large crowds or driving, that remind you of the traumatic event. This also includes keeping yourself preoccupied to avoid thinking about the event.

Changes in beliefs and feelings about yourself and others

This can include avoiding relationships with other people, not being able to trust others, or believing the world is very dangerous.

Hyperarousal

Hyperarousal refers to constantly being on-alert or jittery. For example, you might have a hard time sleeping or concentrating. You might also be unusually startled by loud or unexpected noises.

Somatic symptoms

These refer to physical symptoms that don't have any underlying medical cause. For example, when something reminds you of the traumatic event, you might feel dizzy or nauseated.

Symptoms of C-PTSD

People with CPTSD typically have the above PTSD symptoms along with additional symptoms, including:

Lack of emotional regulation

This refers to having uncontrollable feelings, such as explosive anger or ongoing sadness.

Changes in consciousness

This can include forgetting the traumatic event or feeling detached from your emotions or body, which is also called dissociation.

Negative self-perception

You may feel guilt or shame, to the point that you feel completely different from other people.

Difficulty with relationships

You might find yourself avoiding relationships with other people out of mistrust or a feeling of not knowing how to interact with others. On the other hand, some might seek relationships with people who harm them because it feels familiar.

Distorted perception of abuser

This includes becoming preoccupied with the relationship between you and your abuser. It can also include preoccupation with revenge or giving your abuser complete power over your life.

Loss of systems of meanings

Systems of meaning refer to your religion or beliefs about the world. For example, you might lose faith in some long-held beliefs you had or develop a strong sense of despair or hopelessness about the world.

It's important to note that symptoms of both PTSD and CPTSD can vary widely between people, and even within one person over time. For example, you might find yourself avoiding social situations for a period of time, only to start seeking potentially dangerous situations months or years later.

If you're close to someone with CPTSD, it's also important to remember that their thoughts and beliefs might not always match up with their emotions. They might know that, logically, they should avoid their abuser. However, they might also hold onto a sense of affection toward them.

Behaviors

People with PTSD or complex PTSD may exhibit certain behaviors in an attempt to manage their symptoms. Examples of such behaviors include:

- abusing alcohol or drugs
- avoiding unpleasant situations by becoming "people-pleasers"
- lashing out at minor criticisms
- self-harm

These behaviors can develop as a way to deal with or forget about trauma and emotional pain. Often, a person develops them during the period of trauma. Once the trauma is no longer ongoing, a person may begin to heal and reduce their reliance on these behaviors. Or, the behaviors may persist and even worsen with the passage of time.

Friends and family of people with complex PTSD should be aware that these types of behaviors may represent coping mechanisms and attempts to gain some control over emotions.

To recover from PTSD or complex PTSD, a person can seek treatment and learn to replace these behaviors with ones that are more positive and constructive.

How is it diagnosed?

CPTSD is still a relatively new condition, so some doctors aren't aware of it. This can make it hard to get an official diagnosis, and you might be diagnosed with PTSD instead of CPTSD. There's no specific test for determining whether you have CPTSD, but keeping a detailed log of your symptoms can help your doctor make a more accurate diagnosis. Try to keep track of when your symptoms started as well as any changes in them over time.

Once you find a doctor, they'll start by asking about your symptoms, as well as any traumatic events in your past. For the initial diagnosis, you likely won't need to go into too much detail if it makes you uncomfortable.

Next, they may ask about any family history of mental illness or other risk factors. Make sure to tell them about any medications or supplements you take, as well as any recreational drugs you use. Try to be as honest as you can with them so they can make the best recommendations for you.

If you've had symptoms of post-traumatic stress for at least a month and they interfere with your daily life, your doctor will likely start with a diagnosis of PTSD. Depending on the traumatic event and whether you have additional symptoms, such as ongoing relationship problems or trouble controlling your emotions, they may diagnose you with CPTSD.

Keep in mind that you may need to see a few doctors before you find someone you feel comfortable with. This is very normal, especially for people dealing with C-PTSD.

Treatment

Treatment options for complex PTSD include psychotherapy, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR), and medication.

There are several treatment options for CPTSD that can both reduce your symptoms and help you better manage them.

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy involves talking with a therapist either alone or in a group. It also includes the use of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). This type of treatment helps you identify negative thought patterns and gives you tools to replace them with more healthy, positive thoughts.

Your doctor might also recommend dialectical behavioral therapy, a type of CBT that helps you better respond to stress and build stronger relationships with others.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

EMDR is commonly used to treat PTSD, and it can be helpful for CPTSD as well. You'll be asked to briefly think about a traumatic moment while moving your eyes from side to side. Other techniques include having someone tap on your hands instead of moving your eyes. Over time, this process may help to desensitize you to traumatic memories and thoughts.

While there's some debate within the medical community over its use, the American Psychological Association conditionally recommends it for PTSD. This means that they recommend it but additional information is still needed due to insufficient evidence.

Medication

Medications traditionally used to treat depression can also help with symptoms of CPTSD. They tend to work best when combined with another form of treatment, such as CBT. Common antidepressants used for CPTSD may include:

- sertraline (Zoloft)
- paroxetine (Paxil)
- fluoxetine (Prozac)

While some people benefit from using these medications long term, you may only need to take them for a short period of time while you learn new coping strategies.

Living with complex PTSD

Having complex PTSD can be frightening. It can cause feelings of alienation and isolation. People living with complex PTSD can seek support from organizations that understand the condition.

It may also help to attend a support group, either in person or online, to connect with others who are going through similar experiences.

Complex PTSD can cause people to lose trust in others, and it is essential that people try to engage in everyday activities. This can be a key step for people working toward leading healthy, balanced lives.

These activities may include:

- exercising regularly
- finding a job
- making new friends
- socializing with old friends, if these relationships were healthy
- taking up a hobby

One goal of treatment is to attempt to develop or recapture feelings of trust in others and the world. This can take time, but participating in healthy relationships with family and friends is a positive step.

Recovery and outlook

Recovering from complex PTSD takes time. For some people, the condition poses lifelong challenges. However, with therapy, medication, and lifestyle changes, people can manage their symptoms and enjoy a good quality of life.

Are there any risk factors?

While anyone can develop CPTSD, some people may be more likely to develop it than others. Aside from having past traumatic experiences, risk factors include:

- underlying mental illness, such as anxiety or depression, or a family history of it
- inherited personality traits, which is often referred to as temperament
- how your brain regulates hormones and neurochemicals, especially in response to stress
- lifestyle factors, such as not having a strong support system or having a dangerous job

Living with CPTSD

CPTSD is a serious mental health condition that can take some time to treat, and for many people, it's a lifelong condition. However, a combination of therapy and medication can help you manage your symptoms and significantly improve your quality of life.

If starting treatment sounds overwhelming, consider joining a support group — either in person or online, first. Sharing your experience with people in similar situations is often the first step toward recovery.

Suggested reads

- “The Body Keeps Score” is considered a must-read for anyone recovering from trauma.
- “The Complex PTSD Workbook” contains exercises and examples designed to empower you to take control of your physical and mental health.
- “Complex PTSD: From Surviving to Thriving” is a great resource for breaking down complex psychological concepts related to trauma. Plus, the author is a licensed psychotherapist who happens to have CPTSD.

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