

## PTSD Bytes – Audio Transcription

Episode #:	13
Guest:	Elissa McCarthy, PhD
Title:	#13: PTSD and Insomnia

Pearl:

Welcome and thank you for tuning in to PTSD Bytes, the podcast where we invite experts to talk about PTSD and mental health and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. We'll cover a new topic every other week in bite sized episodes. I'm your host, Pearl McGee-Vincent, and I'm a clinical psychologist at the Veteran's Affairs National Center for PTSD.

Pearl:

In this episode, I will be speaking with Elissa McCarthy, a clinical psychologist at the National Center for PTSD located at the White River Junction VA in Vermont. She actually trains other providers and clinicians in an effective treatment called Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia or CBT-I for short. Welcome Dr. McCarthy, it's great to have you on the podcast.

Elissa:

Thanks for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Pearl:

It seems like so many people struggle with sleep and it sounds like you have some really good news for us today, that there is treatment that works. Tell us about CBT for insomnia.

Elissa:

Yeah, one of the great things about CBT for insomnia, often I'll refer to it as CBT-I, is it's the gold standard effective treatment. So if you're looking for the best chance of recovering from insomnia, consider CBT-I. It is a short treatment, it typically is about six sessions. You meet with a provider once a week. In just over a month, you can recover from your insomnia disorder. The way that the treatment works is it provides education about sleep, the rationale for changes that may be recommended. So if someone's having difficulty getting to sleep, or they wake up early in the morning before they intended to wake up, how do we help them get back to sleep and allow sleep to be restful and feel refreshed in the morning? And that's really what CBT-I targets. And also works to address things that may get in the way of sleep, like worries, and any kind of unhealthy sleep practices that might have developed over time.

Pearl

Not being able to sleep can be really frustrating, extremely stressful. How do people know if their insomnia is bad enough to seek treatment?

Elissa:

If someone has concerns about their sleep, I encourage you to reach out to your provider. When sleep disruption happens more days than not and you're not getting the quality of sleep that you want, nor

the amount of sleep that you want to feel rested and that's having an impact on your life. And so it could be that you're not feeling as productive at work because you're feeling sleepy, or your mood, or concentration may be shifted due to poor sleep. That's where you really want to find a provider to talk with you about what may be going on with your sleep and see if there is insomnia.

Pearl:

And you're not only an insomnia expert, but you're also an expert in PTSD. What can you tell us about PTSD and sleep disturbances?

Elissa:

Of the 20 symptoms of PTSD, 2 are related to sleep difficulties. But one of the things that's really important to be aware of is it can also be a standalone sleep disorder.

Pearl:

Can you clarify what you mean by standalone disorder?

Elissa:

Yes. So someone may be diagnosed with PTSD and also have sleep problems. What I mean by a standalone disorder is when those sleep problems become their own sleep disorder, such as insomnia disorder, and also the individual has PTSD. So they both occur at the same time and both may need their own treatment to help resolve the problems associated with those.

Pearl:

Thank you, that helps. If somebody has both PTSD and insomnia that's significant enough that it's its own disorder that requires a treatment like CBT-I, would you recommend that they do the PTSD treatment first or the insomnia treatment first, or does it matter?

Elissa:

Ideally, if someone can have both the PTSD addressed and the insomnia disorder addressed at the same time, that's I think the best case scenario. That's a discussion I encourage you to have with the provider that you're working with. If you are really finding that the sleep is so problematic that you're not able to focus or concentrate, you may want to talk about what would it be like if I were to address my insomnia disorder first and then address my PTSD. Or you may want to say, "look, I'm constantly on guard, these memories are coming back when I don't want to have them, I'd like to address my PTSD and see if my sleep gets better." There's no wrong door into treatment in my opinion. It's just what works best for you.

Pearl:

What types of sleep disturbances are common in PTSD? And does CBT-I help with other things, not just insomnia?

Elissa:

With individuals who've been diagnosed with PTSD and insomnia, you hear a lot of reports around nightmares. And that's when someone wakes up from a disturbing dream, maybe their heart's pounding or sweating. And we hear a lot of different things like I dread going to sleep at night because I don't

want to have a nightmare. Or they don't want to sleep in the area that's designated for sleep, because it brings up trauma reminders. With CBT-I, those can also be incorporated into the treatment. CBT-I isn't a treatment for nightmares, but if you improve someone's sleep, you also may see a decrease in nightmares because they're sleeping better. And bringing those things into CBT-I is really an important part of helping individuals recover from insomnia disorder.

Pearl:

I'm just wondering, obviously no treatment is 100% effective for everyone, but what can you tell us about how effective CBT-I is? And are there certain people who are more likely to benefit from it?

Elissa:

I don't think that we have enough information to know for sure who will respond best. Most people respond very well to CBT-I, and no longer have sleep problems that are causing difficulty in their life. I think that's a really important aspect of treatment is give yourself the opportunity, it works for most people. And if it doesn't, then that's good information because maybe something else is some of the difficulties in sleep.

Pearl:

What about medication for insomnia?

Elissa:

Medication doesn't have the long-term benefits that CBT-I has, doesn't address the problem that's driving the insomnia. For individuals with insomnia, some of those ways of thinking or behaviors that are trying to get you back on course are actually what may be keeping your sleep problems going. And CBT-I addresses those. So you don't have the difficulties long term and you know how to manage them long term.

Pearl:

Are there other sleep disorders that you often see when you are treating insomnia and how are those other disorders addressed?

Elissa:

One of the most common sleep disorders is sleep apnea. And one of the treatments for sleep apnea that's the most effective is the use of a CPAP device, that helps the individuals continually breathe throughout the night. Because individuals with sleep apnea will have times throughout the night where they stop breathing and it wakes them up or disrupts their sleep. And so what we do within CBT-I is encourage the use of the CPAP throughout the treatment, so that both sleep disorders can be addressed.

Pearl:

Thank you. And for folks listening, who are interested, whether they receive their healthcare inside a VA or through another healthcare provider, what would be the best way for them to find a provider that is trained in CBT-I?

Elissa:

Unfortunately there is a shortage of providers in the community trained in CBT-I. I would encourage you to reach out to a primary care provider and ask if they are aware of anyone in the community. Within VA. I would just reach out to any healthcare provider and ask them for a referral for insomnia treatment.

Pearl:

For many of us, our first step is to go to the internet and there can be resources out there that are more reliable than others. What do you recommend for folks to check out if they are wanting help with insomnia?

Elissa:

The first recommendation I would have is something called Insomnia Coach. And this is an app that can be downloaded, where you can learn about sleep in a way that is digestible and relatable. Within this Coach, you can track how your sleep is each night, you can share that information with your provider. And they've got great tips and tools. So if you are awake and can't return to sleep, they've got tips for ways to help you quiet your mind or relax, so that sleep naturally unfolds. This can be a self-paced way of helping you with your sleep difficulties, and it can be used along treatment.

The other one that I would also consider is geared towards Veterans, but could be helpful for any of your listeners. If you go into Google and type in Veteran training Path to Better Sleep. And this is an online course where there's videos, different interactive features that you can look at. It can be used on your phone or at a computer. There's great information about kind of helping you in general with sleep difficulties that you're having.

Pearl:

Thank you. And thank you so much, Dr. McCarthy for joining us today and really offering the encouraging information about insomnia being very treatable.

Elissa:

Thank you so much for having me. It's been a pleasure to be here.

Pearl:

Dr. McCarthy mentioned the Insomnia Coach mobile app, which you can download by searching for Insomnia Coach on your smartphone or tablet. Check out Path to Better Sleep available at [veterantraining.va.gov](http://veterantraining.va.gov), that's [veterantraining.va.gov](http://veterantraining.va.gov). Remember that self-guided websites and mobile apps are not a replacement for treatment with a provider.

Pearl:

This has been an episode of PTSD Bytes. The podcast that delivers Bytes, sized expertise on issues related to PTSD, mental health and technology. Catch new episodes every other week by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Thank you for joining us.