

PTSD Bytes – Audio Transcription

Episode #:	17
Guests:	Leslie Morland, PhD & Kayla Knopp, PhD
Title:	#17: PTSD and Relationships

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 today's episode, we will talk about PTSD and relationships, especially relationships with a spouse or partner. I will be speaking with two guests, both joining us from the San Diego VA. Dr. Leslie Morland Morland is a clinical psychologist, Director of Telemental Health, Chief of Outpatient Access and PTSD researcher at the National Center for PTSD. And Dr. Kayla Knopp is also a clinical psychologist and research psychologist at the San Diego VA. Welcome Drs. Morland and Knopp.

Leslie Morland:

Thank you so much for having us.

Kayla Knopp:

Thank you, really excited to talk about this topic.

Pearl:

So I'm interested in what are some of the common ways that PTSD can impact a relationship.

Leslie Morland:

Great, thank you for that question. Within a romantic relationship, PTSD symptoms certainly can impact both members of the relationship. Specifically, symptoms of PTSD, such as anger, withdrawal, and avoidance can impact a couple's ability to communicate and calmly problem solve. Other symptoms of PTSD, such as numbing, withdrawal, can impact couple's ability to emotionally connect and, and also be physically intimate. Over time, this can certainly create some emotional distance in the relationship. Sometimes a partner with PTSD might be engaging in avoidance behaviors, which can range from emotionally disengaging, but could also include things like substance use, which obviously can impact a relationship.

Pearl:

Thank you, Dr. Morland, that really illustrates some of the added challenges that folks dealing with PTSD experience in relationships. And for our listeners who are wondering, what should I tell my partner about my PTSD symptoms, what guidance would you offer for them?

Leslie Morland:

I do think it is very helpful to share with your partner your current experience of PTSD symptoms, some of what you're struggling with. And just to make the distinction, it doesn't necessarily mean it's important that you have to tell your partner the details of your traumatic experience. For many couples, both partners having an understanding of what PTSD is, can really help build empathy and build a sense of safety for both partners.

Pearl:

And when we talk about intimate partner relationships, is that a specific type of relationship or does it include whether you're married or cohabitating?

Kayla Knopp:

any type of romantic or intimate partnership, including married or unmarried relationships, dating relationships, same gender or mixed gender relationships, short-term or longer-term relationships. All of these types of relationships can be impacted by the type of struggles that PTSD can bring in.

Pearl:

Thank you, that's really helpful context. For listeners who are struggling with the impact of PTSD on their relationship, how can they get help?

Leslie Morland:

There's a range of ways couples can get help. And some of it can be certainly psychotherapy, couples therapy. And so maybe I'll refer to Dr. Knopp here to talk a little bit about the different ways that people and couples can get help for their relationship with PTSD.

Kayla Knopp:

One of the real benefits I think about the modern era is that people can access really good mental healthcare using technology and digital tools. Certainly the National Center for PTSD's website is a great place to start. And then for additional guidance, there are a number of mobile apps and online programs that can provide some really useful guidance for couples as well.

Pearl:

Can you say more about accessing couples therapy versus using a digital resource? If our listeners might be thinking about getting couples therapy with a provider versus accessing a mobile option. What kinds of things might they consider?

Kayla Knopp:

Certainly traditional couples therapy is effective and can be really useful at helping couples correct patterns of interaction that they have gotten stuck in that are not working for them, especially patterns that are influenced by PTSD. Unfortunately, couples therapy is often a little bit difficult to access for many folks and particularly couples therapy where the provider is trained, not only in working with couples, but also really well-trained in PTSD. So the other thing that can be a struggle with accessing couple therapy is some logistical barriers. Not only having to coordinate one person's schedule, but having to coordinate two. And if the couple has children figuring out childcare, transportation. Digital tools can be a really good alternative to that. Digital tools can provide all of the same, really good evidence-based intervention strategies and accurate information about PTSD and relationships, but they

often provide more flexibility in terms of how and when couples can access their care. Digital tools can be self-directed. And many of the digital tools available currently also come with the option of meeting with a clinician for brief periods of time, for some coaching as well.

Pearl:

I'm interested in the difference between traditional couples therapy offered over telehealth versus other types of digital tools like an app or an online program. Can you break those down for us?

Leslie Morland:

Telehealth is providing traditional psychotherapy, whether it be couples therapy or individual therapy over a video, like a zoom platform, where you're going to meet with your provider in real time, but you still have the flexibility of doing that from your home after hours. We're really fortunate to know that there's a lot of research out there that allows us to provide couples therapy or a lot of our PTSD therapies over telehealth.

Kayla Knopp:

Yeah. The digital tools that are more like mobile apps or online programs are distinct from telehealth in a couple of important ways. The first is that they are what we call asynchronous. And what that means is that couples or individuals can interact with the online program or with the mobile app at a separate time than their partner and any clinical provider. So that provides a lot more flexibility. However, we know that telehealth is pretty much just as effective as in-person therapy. That's not necessarily the case for these digital tools. So there is a little bit of a trade-off, right, for the increased access and reach of these digital tools compared to perhaps they're not quite so powerful for the couples who are using them. For folks who want a more intensive form of care, couple therapy, is probably a better choice. For couples who are maybe just beginning to notice some struggles or who are really wanting that flexibility, online programs or mobile apps, can be a great option.

Pearl:

Thank you, very helpful. With so many different resources being available online and in the app stores, some of them may be more reliable than others. Can you tell us about some of these digital resources that you might recommend as being supported by evidence or developed by reliable sources?

Kayla Knopp:

That is a very important question. It is a real struggle for consumers to figure out what are the mobile apps and online programs that are reputable, that I can trust to have accurate information. Where I would recommend folks start are the apps that have been developed by the National Center for PTSD. And the two that are most relevant for romantic partners and families are PTSD Family Coach. It provides a lot of information and strategies for family members of people struggling with PTSD. A newer app that I really love is called Couples Coach. And that is designed for both the person struggling with PTSD and their partner. You don't even need to have PTSD to use the Couple's Coach app. It's unique because both partners can use the mobile app together and it really helps them improve their interactions and their relationship in ways that can benefit not only the relationship, but how they interact around PTSD.

The last resource that I'll mention is for general online relationship programs. So the two programs that I would recommend are Our Relationship, which can be found at ourrelationship.com and ePREP, which

can be found at lovetakeslearning.com. Both of these online programs are based on evidence-based couple therapies, and they can be a great fit for couples wanting to improve their relationship.

Pearl:

Thank you, Dr. Knopp, for that information. For listeners who are interested in traditional therapy with a couples therapist, where might they start the process, whether that's in VA or with a provider in the community.

Leslie Morland:

Within the VA, there are family mental health programs and or specific providers who are trained in couples therapy. And the best way would be to ask your primary care or if you have a mental health provider, if that referral for couple's therapy is available at your VA. If it's not available at the VA, they would refer you to the community. And typically, in the community, you can look for providers who are specifically trained in couple's therapy and PTSD, ideally.

Pearl:

Thank you. That's very helpful.

Thank you Drs. Morland and Knopp for sharing your expertise on intimate partner relationships and PTSD Couples Coach, and PTSD Family Coach can be found wherever you download your mobile apps. If you have questions about any of the mobile apps from the National Center for PTSD, you can reach our team at mobilementalhealth@va.gov. Thank you for joining us.

Leslie Morland:

Thank you so much for having us.

Pearl:

This has been an episode of PTSD Bytes, the podcast that delivers bite-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.