

## PTSD Bytes – Audio Transcription

Episode #:	18
Guest:	Marylene Cloitre, PhD & Annabel Prins PhD
Title:	#18: Trauma, Emotions, and Relationship Skills

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:

We are speaking with two guests today about trauma, emotions, and relationships. Dr. Marylene Cloitre and Dr. Annabel Prins are both clinical psychologists at the National Center for PTSD. Dr. Cloitre is also a clinical professor affiliate in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University. She is the lead developer of a therapy called Skills Training in Affective and Interpersonal Regulation or STAIR, which she will talk about with us today. Dr. Prins is the lead facilitator for group STAIR therapy at the American Lake VA and is also a retired professor of psychology at San Jose State University. Welcome Drs. Cloitre and Prins.

Marylene Cloitre:

Thank you. Happy to be here.

Annabel Prins:

Thank You. It's very nice to join you today.

Pearl:

So, I'm excited to learn about STAIR. Let's dive right in. Dr. Cloitre, can you kick us off by giving us an overview of STAIR.

Marylene Cloitre:

Sure. STAIR teaches skills in regulating emotions and managing relationships. These are two areas of functioning that trauma really negatively impacts. So, it was my goal to develop a treatment that responded to these issues in a really direct way. STAIR originally was dedicated to people who'd experienced childhood abuse because those are the years in which skills and our capacity really develop. Over time, we learned that STAIR actually was a program that was useful for everyone who was trauma exposed. STAIR doesn't involve a direct review of traumatic events, but really focuses on day-to-day problems. Thinking about how to do things differently, practicing skills that support these changes or even strengthening skills they already have. And interestingly, what we have found is that in addition to improving emotion regulation, and relationship skills, it also reduces PTSD, depression, and other symptoms.

Pearl:

That's amazing. I'm curious to learn from Dr. Prins as a clinician trained in STAIR. Can you tell our listeners what the treatment looks like in practice?

Annabel Prins:

STAIR usually involves 10 to 12 weekly sessions, with the first part focused on emotion regulation skills and the second part focused on interpersonal skills. Trauma can make it difficult to identify the emotions you might be experiencing or to modulate the intensity of emotions. Emotional experiences can be broken down into three response components or channels.

A body channel, a thought channel, and a behavior channel. What someone might be experiencing physically, muscular tension or butterflies when someone's anxious. In the thought channel, we might look for what people think or believe in terms of their ability to handle their emotions. In the behavior channel, we look at what we actually do, like escape or avoiding the situations. So really in the first part of treatment, we focus on helping patients to become observers of their emotional experience. The second part of STAIR introduces the interpersonal skills like assertiveness, but emotion regulation continues to be emphasized.

Pearl:

I'm wondering if you can break down a little bit more concretely, what you mean when you talk about emotion regulation, what emotion regulation means and how it becomes a challenge for folks with trauma.

Marylene Cloitre:

Emotion regulation is about being aware of one's feelings and experiencing them in a comfortable way that allows people to be really connected to the present. Often trauma does two things to emotions. Either people become overwhelmed by them, or people totally shut down and feel nothing. And our goal in STAIR is to bring people back to a healthy baseline where they experience their feelings, know what they are and can express them in what I like to call a window of comfort so that they can be present. And by being present, we mean being able to attend to what's going on in the environment, to interact with people, and to achieve goals.

Pearl:

Thank you. And I hear what you're saying, finding that ability to experience emotions at a level that is, tolerable and manageable. And I understand that this has been helpful for folks with PTSD who have particular challenges in this area. And I'm also thinking about all of the people that I know that struggle with emotions. And it makes me wonder whether STAIR is only for people who have a PTSD diagnosis, or if it can be helpful to other people.

Marylene Cloitre:

STAIR is useful for anyone who has some challenges in identifying and expressing emotions. Sometimes this is related to having PTSD. Other times it can be related to depression, and now we're learning that everyone, each and every one of us, can use some help in becoming more skilled in being more aware of our emotions and being able to effectively express our emotions. And I think for people who come from environments where there are not great role models for these kinds of skills, that a program like STAIR is very useful.

Pearl:

I appreciate you Dr. Cloitre endorsing that this isn't just for somebody with a special diagnosis or concern, but something that all of us can really benefit from.

Marylene Cloitre:

I want to add another important aspect of emotion regulation training in STAIR is that we teach all sorts of skills that allow people to begin to see some joy and pleasure in life. And we know that positive emotions are really important to quality of life and to improving the quality of our relationships.

Pearl:

I'm almost picturing like a volume knob where it goes from one to 10. I'm turning the volume knob down on the difficult or negative emotions and with the positive emotions, I'm turning the volume up.

Now, since this is the PTSD Bytes podcast, we always are interested in hearing more about technology, tell us about the STAIR Coach mobile app and the Web STAIR online program.

Annabel Prins:

STAIR Coach includes many of the same features and techniques that are part of the STAIR psychotherapy. There is a training plan, that guides users through specific self-assessments, some educational materials. And then of course these, emotion regulation techniques. That app includes a mood journal, just a really super helpful tool for seeing the connection between thoughts and mood. Another big feature is creating one's own self care plan. All of the various tools, techniques are easily accessible from the home screen so that you're able to access them without going through the training plan. And I'll turn it over to Marylene to talk about WebSTAIR.

Marylene Cloitre:

WebSTAIR, as it sounds like, is a web-based or online program, which pretty much directly translates the STAIR program onto a self-guided 10 session module program. A person who uses the program goes through each module one by one, they take about 30 to 40 minutes to complete. The first five are about emotion regulation. The second five are about interpersonal skills. What's nice about this program is of course it's self-guided so people can take their time and use it when convenient to them. And it also has self-assessments so people can evaluate how much change has been going on.

Right now, WebSTAIR can only be accessed in VA through a therapist or facilitator. We are in the process of having WebSTAIR migrated to the VA cloud, and we hope that in the next 12 months or so, it will be publicly available to Veterans, to VA clinicians and to the general public.

Pearl:

Thank you, Doctors Cloitre and Prins for joining us and sharing your expertise on how trauma impacts emotions and interpersonal skills. And for teaching us about STAIR. For listeners who are interested in the STAIR Coach mobile app, that can be downloaded for free wherever you get your mobile apps, whether you are a Android or iOS user.

Marylene Cloitre:

If people are interested in getting STAIR therapy, feel free to contact me or access the clinician directory of ISTSS, the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies.

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.