

Episode #:	23
Topic:	PTSD and Avoidance
Guest:	Dr. Sadie Larsen, PhD
Working title:	#23: PTSD and Avoidance

Colleen:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, brought to you by the Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD. In this series, we talk to experts about posttraumatic stress disorder and mental health, with a focus on free digital resources that can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport.

In today's episode, we will be talking about PTSD and avoidance – what it is, why we do it, and why avoidance may interfere with recovery. I'm joined today by Dr. Sadie Larsen, who is a clinical psychologist at the National Center for PTSD, and an Associate Professor at the Medical College of Wisconsin. Welcome Dr. Larsen.

Dr. Larsen:

Thank you. I'm so glad to be here.

Colleen:

So I'd like to begin by clarifying something. What do we mean by avoidance when we talk about PTSD? What does it look like?

Dr. Larsen:

Well, great question because avoidance, when we talk about this in general, could mean a lot of things. Any of us avoid things all the time, like I'm avoiding doing some homework right now. But when we're talking about PTSD-related avoidance, we're really meaning avoiding specific things that are painful because they remind you of something related to a trauma or to PTSD.

Colleen:

I see. And why do people with PTSD avoid?

Dr. Larsen:

It's a pretty natural reaction, right? I try to protect myself from re-burning my hand, if I burn myself on a stove, right? I'm going to avoid touching that stove again. But when we're talking about PTSD, it's trying to protect ourselves from feeling those negative feelings that we might have felt at the time of a trauma.

Colleen:

Yeah, that makes sense. And I'm wondering, are there different ways that people avoid?

Dr. Larsen:

Yeah, there are a lot of different ways that people can avoid related to trauma. People may avoid thinking or feeling things about a trauma. So for instance, if I catch myself thinking about a trauma, I might try to distract myself by throwing myself into work. People can also avoid people or places or things that remind them of a trauma in some way. If a trauma was an IED explosion on the side of a

highway, people might find themselves avoiding driving. And because many types of trauma involve people, oftentimes avoidance starts to involve avoiding other people. And that can lead us to being socially isolated in general, because a lot of times avoidance tends to generalize. It, starts with avoiding the person who assaulted us, but it might generalize to people who sort of look like that person. And then even more broad than that.

Colleen:

It seems like it might be hard to recognize avoidance when it's happening.

Dr. Larsen:

It can be, yeah, because it can look like all sorts of other things. Some people may work their whole lives and it's really not until they retire that they start to realize, oh, I was working so much so that I never had to think about this. And now that I'm not working anymore, I realize that I'm finding myself thinking about trauma all the time. So it's not always easy to tell right off the bat. We really have to look at why are we doing the things that we're doing in order to determine whether they're PTSD-related avoidance, or just something else.

Colleen:

Yeah, that makes sense. You also mentioned people avoiding feelings. What does that look like?

Dr. Larsen:

So when people experience a trauma, there could be fear, could be guilt, could be shame. Oftentimes people don't want to feel that feeling and so they'll try really hard to block it out. What can happen is that over time, that can lead to this general emotional numbing where we're not feeling a whole range of emotions.

Colleen:

Wow. So in an attempt to block out some of the negative emotions, like pain and sadness, sounds like people end up blocking out joy and other positive feelings.

Dr. Larsen:

That's often one of the most painful symptoms of PTSD for people because it blocks them from having the kind of life that they want to live.

Colleen:

And how common is avoidance?

Dr. Larsen:

For people with PTSD, everyone has some kind of avoidance.

Colleen:

Okay, so help me understand. If I have PTSD and I don't go out at night because I don't feel safe, I could see how some people might say that that just makes good sense, right? But you're saying that it would be considered avoidance.

Dr. Larsen:

It really all depends on context, right? So if let's say I live in a really dangerous neighborhood and I've never really gone out at night because it's pretty objectively not a safe neighborhood, well, that probably just makes good sense. But if on the other hand, I used to go out at night and now after a trauma, I'm not going out at night anymore, then it starts to look like that might be PTSD-related avoidance, especially if there's some sort of trauma reminder involved in it.

Colleen:

So it sounds like it would be considered a problem if you're avoiding something that you used to do.

Dr. Larsen:

I would say that's a pretty reasonable sign that it might be PTSD-related avoidance. or if I'm not doing something that people around me are able to do pretty easily. And the problem here is that avoidance can become pretty broad. With the example of going out at night, let's say that I got mugged when it was 6:00 PM and so I start not going out at 6:00 PM but as PTSD develops, avoid more and more going out at night, and it can really start to take over people's lives.

Colleen:

Absolutely. So it sounds like it gets worse over time and I find myself wondering, how does avoidance interfere with recovery?

Dr. Larsen:

It can be a problem for a couple of reasons. One is that you can see from the examples that I'm giving that avoidance can tend to make your life narrower over time. And the problem here is when it gets in the way of doing things that really matter to you, like spending time with people that you care about. And the second problem is that it can keep you stuck. People might think, if I ever really let myself think about this trauma, I'll fall apart. And because they avoid thinking about it, they really never get the chance to see that actually they could handle it, that they might be stronger than they realize.

Colleen:

And it sounds like it would be difficult to manage all of that avoidance over time as the list gets longer and longer. You gave the example of not going out at night. I can imagine that telling someone to do the very thing that they're uncomfortable with might seem really challenging. So what would you say to someone who felt that way?

Dr. Larsen:

Yeah, the first thing I'd say is that makes complete sense. It is pretty challenging, and it's partially because your brain is trying to protect you from painful things. But on the other hand, this is something that is changeable. So if you start and find ways to have small successes, this is something that you can build up to. The same way that you would tackle any insurmountable thing is you break it into smaller tasks and you start with something easier. So if you can face something that you've been avoiding and if you can stick with that, you'll notice that your anxiety starts to go down over time.

Colleen:

So if someone wanted to seek professional help for avoidance and PTSD, where can they look?

Dr. Larsen:

Well, if you've tried facing it on your own and you're finding it a bit more than you can handle at that moment, this is a great time to talk to a therapist. This is a big part of our bread and butter, helping people face things that are hard to face. One of the main treatments for PTSD, is really all built around challenging avoidance and helping people have success with doing that.

Colleen:

Could you say a little bit more about the types of therapy that one should look for if they're looking to address their avoidance?

Dr. Larsen:

Sure. One of the things that you may want to look for is cognitive behavioral therapy or trauma-focused therapy. So, treatments like Prolonged Exposure, Cognitive Processing Therapy, EMDR, these are all treatments that are really designed to help you start to face some of the things that you've been avoiding.

Colleen:

We actually had guests join us to speak about those types of therapies on past episodes for those who want to learn more. But for now, what about technology? Are there any tools that can help with PTSD and avoidance?

Dr. Larsen:

Yeah, there are a couple of different ones that touch on this. The main one that I think of is the PTSD Coach app. And there are a few different tools that you might use here. So, one of the main ones would be the RID or R-I-D tool for coping with triggers. And what this does is it walks you through what to do when you're triggered by reminders of a past trauma. And so it starts by walking you through a breathing relaxation and then helps you to identify what it was that triggered you. Although you may have been reminded of the trauma, really to acknowledge that the trauma is not happening again right now, that you are safe right now. And then it walks you through deciding what you might do to manage that anxiety at this moment. And one of the things that it suggests is trying to decrease the triggers power by sticking around to see that you can handle it, and that your stress will actually go down the longer that you stick it out.

Colleen:

And Dr. Larsen, I heard you say RID tool. Does that stand for something?

Dr. Larsen:

Right, good question. So RID stands for relax, identify and decide. Relax a little bit, identify what the trigger was, and then decide what you want to do with it.

Colleen:

Perfect. Any other tools that can help with PTSD and avoidance?

Dr. Larsen:

Yeah, a couple others that I'll mention that are also part of the PTSD coach app. One is learning about avoidance. if you go to learn. And then about PTSD, there are a couple of different topics that might be relevant here – I am avoiding things and social isolation. So, all of these can be helpful, just learning more about what this looks like as part of PTSD, and then giving you some tools for potentially managing it differently. There's also a webpage on the National Center for PTSD website about avoidance. So, if you go to any search engine and put in NCPTSD and avoidance, that'll bring up that page. And then more generally on the National Center for PTSD website about PTSD and treatments for it.

Colleen:

Thank you for those recommendations. I think it's really helpful to hear about specific tools in some of these apps that we talk about on this podcast. That's all the time we have for today, so thank you so much for joining me, Dr. Larsen.

Dr. Larsen:

Well, thank you too. It's been great to be here, I'm always happy to talk about this.

Colleen:

And as a reminder to our listeners, the mobile app PTSD Coach, is available to everyone for free. You can find it by searching PTSD Coach in the App store or Google Play. All of the resources mentioned today can be found in the show notes for the podcast.

Andrea:

Hello, this is Andrea Jamison and I'm the executive producer of the PTSD Bytes podcast. Catch new episodes by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Show notes and more information are on our website: [www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast). Thank you for joining us.