

PTSD Bytes – Audio Transcription

Episode #:	3
Guest:	Sonya Norman, PhD
Title:	#3: What is PTSD?

Pearl:

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 leading experts about posttraumatic stress disorder, mental health, and self-care with a focus on free digital resources that can help.

Today we will be talking to Dr. Sonya Norman about PTSD or posttraumatic stress disorder. Dr. Norman is the Director of the PTSD consultation program at the National Center for PTSD and Professor of Psychiatry at the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine. She is a clinical psychologist who researches PTSD and PTSD treatment. Thank you for joining us, Dr. Norman.

Sonya:

Thank you so much for having me.

Pearl:

So, we hear the term PTSD a lot in the media, in the news, even in popular TV shows. Can you break down what the term PTSD or posttraumatic stress disorder means?

Sonya:

Sure. So posttraumatic stress disorder is a mental health diagnosis that some people get after experiencing a traumatic event. And when I say traumatic event, when we use it in the context of PTSD, it's really a life-threatening event where someone thought they were going to die, or maybe even witness someone else dying or almost dying. So it's a very specific context. So when someone goes through an event like that, of course it's difficult for most everyone, but a lot of people over time feel better and go back to their normal lives. For some people they continue to be very distressed, maybe to be on very high alert, maybe the way they view the world has changed, where it never feels safe anymore, or they don't feel like they can keep themselves or their families safe anymore. They might feel like they want to avoid reminders of this traumatic event. And because they're avoiding things and feelings and people and memories, their world is getting smaller and smaller, and they have fewer opportunities to go back to their previous lives. And they might have nightmares or can't stop thinking about what happened. So those are all examples of the kinds of symptoms people with PTSD have. And again, a lot of that is very normal right after the traumatic event, but if someone is still experiencing those kinds of symptoms of one month, two months, three months, a year, several years later, they may have PTSD.

Pearl:

Can you describe the kinds of challenges that people with PTSD may experience in their day to day lives, what does it look or feel like to live with PTSD?

Sonya:

Yeah, it can look different for different people, but I think some of the common elements are, first of all, that it's exhausting to live with PTSD. Some of the symptoms are that it's hard to sleep, it's hard to concentrate, you're on hyper alert because the world feels very dangerous, you're trying to avoid reminders of the trauma and yet another symptom is that you can't stop thinking about the trauma, so you're putting all this energy into something that's very hard to achieve. So it's just very tiring to live with PTSD.

Pearl:

What kinds of events actually can lead to PTSD?

Sonya:

Some examples might be being assaulted, physically or sexually, or being in a life-threatening fire or hurricane or other disaster, or being in combat, being a prisoner of war. Those are some examples of the kinds of things that might lead to a diagnosis of PTSD.

Pearl:

What about people who develop PTSD and might have self-judgment about the diagnosis or the symptoms and think I'm weak or there's something wrong with me? What do you say to those folks?

Sonya:

Yeah, I think that is really common and it's not just for trauma, I mean, sadly we still live in a world where having mental health symptoms is stigmatized and it can be very hard for people to come forward and get the help they need because of those perceptions – if it says something about me, I failed somehow – and that's just so absolutely not true. In their lifetime, so many people experience some difficulty, whether it's PTSD or depression or anxiety, it's so extremely common. It doesn't say anything about the person other than that, you know, life can be hard and we can all react in different ways.

Pearl:

I think that's a really important message. So we hear a lot about PTSD with regard to Veterans and the military. Is PTSD mostly seen in the Veteran and military population, or is it more widespread than that?

Sonya:

Yeah, it's definitely not limited to Veterans. Anyone who goes through a traumatic event can develop PTSD. We hear about it a lot with Veterans because in the course of war, Veterans are exposed often to a lot of trauma, so that makes them at risk for PTSD. And Veterans did a lot to get the diagnosis recognized and pushed for good treatments to be developed. So the good place that we're in for PTSD, a lot of that is credited to Veterans, but they're certainly not the only ones who can develop PTSD.

Pearl:

Can people get better?

Sonya:

100% people can get better. We have effective treatments, both psychotherapies and medications. And this is a really important point because it used to be that we didn't have effective treatments for PTSD. And so people thought of PTSD kind of as a chronic condition like diabetes, like once you have it, you just live with it as best you can. And we're at a very different place now, we do have treatments that help people recover from PTSD. So I really want to stress that you can recover from PTSD. It doesn't mean you can be cured necessarily, where you have no symptoms and you're exactly how you were before the trauma, but people can be feeling better, doing better, doing more, living the life they want to live, and that's where we're trying to get people with treatment. And we can do that.

Pearl:

That's wonderful. And we have listeners who may be Service members – active duty, Veterans, non-Veterans, folks with family members who might have PTSD and are wondering, how can I get help. And whether they are connected to VA or other community providers or not connected to care at all, what advice would you give for someone interested in learning more about seeking PTSD treatment?

Sonya:

That's a great question. I would suggest speaking of course, to healthcare professional that you trust and know and sharing that you think you might have this and would like to be evaluated further. I would also suggest going to the National Center for PTSD website and looking at the document about PTSD basics and PTSD treatment.

Pearl:

And the National Center for PTSD also has a variety of digital resources that are free and available to the public. Can you tell us about some of the resources that you recommend?

Sonya:

Sure, there really are so many. I do want to mention PTSD Coach, which is an app and PTSD Coach Online, which is a website. And those are great for seeing how you're doing with your symptoms and getting some really in the spot help with symptoms. These aren't a treatment, but they are a great resource for right now, I am having a hard time. And you go on and it helps you figure out what you're feeling, what you're struggling with the most right now, gives you some coping suggestions to deal with what's happening right now. And also does help connect you with treatment and learn more if that's what you need.

Pearl:

And for someone who is living with these symptoms, it sounds really challenging and they might think that treatment isn't for them or that it's too hard or that it won't work. What words would you offer to somebody who is living with untreated PTSD?

Sonya:

Yeah, I know finding that hope can be hard, right? That's also part of PTSD, is it feels like you're stuck in this and it can't get better. And maybe someone tried treatment a while ago and it wasn't that effective, so they're like, see, it doesn't work for me. But again, treatment is getting better and better. We're learning more and more about how to effectively treat PTSD all the time. And as much as it might feel

hard to rally that energy for treatment, to find that hope, to overcome that desire to avoid, it can be so worth it. And treatment is not endless. We're not talking about years and years and years. Again, we don't consider PTSD a chronic condition that needs to be managed forever anymore. We want to get you into treatment, we want to get you better, and we want to get you living your life without the need for ongoing constant treatment. That's the goal. And we're able to do that, to help a lot of people that way. So it's really worth trying.

Pearl:

Thank you, Dr. Norman for joining us today and for sharing your expertise about PTSD and resources that people can check out on their own to find out if PTSD treatment might be right for them or someone in their lives.

Dr. Norman mentioned several important resources today. We want to encourage folks to check out the National Center for PTSD website at ptsd.va.gov. You can also search for PTSD Coach Online in your internet browser. If you have a smartphone or tablet, you can download the PTSD Coach app onto your device for free.

This has been an episode of PTSD Bytes. Find us on your preferred podcast app by searching "PTSD Bytes." That's "PTSD B-Y-T-E-S." New episodes are released every other week. Thank you for joining us.