

Episode #:	38
Topic:	MASD PTSD Treatments
Guest:	Jennifer Wachen, PhD
Working title:	Rapid Recovery: Massed Treatment for PTSD

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, where we talk to experts about post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health, and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport, clinical psychologist at the Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

On today's episode, we will be discussing a new way to receive PTSD treatment—the same effective treatments, just on a faster timeline. I'm joined by Dr. Jennifer Wachen, a clinical research psychologist at the Women's Health Science Division of the National Center for PTSD at VA Boston. She's also an associate professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Boston University Chobanian and the Avedisian School of Medicine, and a member of the VA PTSD consultation Program. Welcome Dr. Wachen.

Dr. Jennifer Wachen:

Thanks for having me.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So let's begin by talking a little bit about your role. So you are at the Women's Health Sciences Division of the National Center for PTSD. Can you talk a little bit about your work there? Specifically, I'm wondering if that means that the treatments we are discussing today are designed for women.

Dr. Jennifer Wachen:

Sure. As a researcher within the National Center for PTSD, I conduct studies on psychotherapies for PTSD in military and Veteran populations. We have a lot of great therapies that we know are effective in treating PTSD and my work's focused on exploring different ways of delivering these treatments that might make them more efficient. I'll say that although I'm located within the Women's Health Sciences Division, the treatments are designed for both men and women with PTSD.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Okay. Now getting into today's topic, we're going to be talking about something called massed treatments for PTSD. I think this is probably a new term for most of us. What are massed treatments for PTSD?

Dr. Jennifer Wachen:

Massed treatment refers to delivering a psychotherapy in a shorter timeframe than it's usually delivered. So, for instance, two of the therapies for PTSD with the strongest research support are cognitive processing therapy and prolonged exposure. And with these treatments, typically patients attend therapy sessions once a week for a number of months until they see an improvement in their symptoms. Massed treatment is those same therapies delivered at least three times a week so that the course of therapy is completed much more quickly. This idea of massed treatment has become more

popular over the past few years and there's been more and more research showing that it can be as effective as treatment delivered in the traditional way.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Okay. So to be totally clear, when we say massed, we don't mean big groups of people and big masses. Massed means that the treatment itself is condensed together on this shorter timeline.

Dr. Jennifer Wachen:

That's right. In fact, the therapy is usually delivered individually with a therapist, although it can be done in small groups too.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Other than timing, are there any differences between massed treatments and standard treatments?

Dr. Jennifer Wachen:

No, the therapy itself is not different. It's the same session content that's normally delivered only once a week or so, just done more often.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Okay. So same treatment just completed more quickly. What does that look like in practice? So for example, how often do people meet with their therapist? Do they have to go to a residential program, those kinds of things.

Dr. Jennifer Wachen:

So, there are actually a few different ways that massed treatment can be done. Some of the first programs to use massed treatment were designed specifically for Veterans and service members, and those are two- or three-week intensive outpatient programs that combine daily sessions of treatments. Usually, cognitive processing therapy or prolonged exposure with other interventions. So, each day includes one or more sessions of trauma-focused therapy in groups or individually, along with other activities. Some of those other activities might include groups to address things like stress management or sleep problems, yoga or other physical activity or things like nutrition counseling. Other types of massed programs include just the trauma-focused therapy delivered more frequently and doesn't include that extra programming. And those programs seem to work just as well. They also offer an evidence-based treatment for PTSD delivered three to five days per week. They may also include check-in groups that provide support a few times throughout the day and there's also time allotted to complete therapy homework assignments. But massed treatment can also be delivered outside of a treatment program just by having sessions with a therapist at least three times a week.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And what are the benefits of massed treatments?

Dr. Jennifer Wachen:

So one of the things we've seen is that it really does help people complete a full course of therapy. The dropout rates for massed treatment are much lower than for regular weekly treatments. This is likely because it reduces the amount of time for life to get in the way of attending sessions. Often we see even

if someone is committed to attending treatment regularly, things can happen that interfere with them completing a full course of therapy. Things like job changes, serious illnesses, family emergencies all have the potential to make it more difficult to attend treatment for many months. It may be easier for someone to clear time to come to therapy for a few weeks straight rather than having to attend an appointment once a week across several months. Avoidance is also a big part of PTSD, so having more frequent sessions might actually help people stay more engaged with treatment and reduce that tendency to avoid. And probably the biggest benefit of massed treatment is the potential to relieve the symptoms of PTSD in a matter of weeks instead of months.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Well, that sounds pretty good to me. The same treatment in a lot less time. Are there any drawbacks for patients who participate in treatment this way? So for example, are there concerns that daily treatment would be too much?

Dr. Jennifer Wachen:

Well, it's understandable that some people may be concerned that daily trauma-focused therapy might be too much to tolerate, but in practice we aren't seeing this to be the case. We're seeing that most people finish massed treatment once they start, which tells us that people are able to do this type of therapy on a frequent basis and that they aren't dropping out because it's too difficult. In fact, as I mentioned earlier, it might reduce the avoidance that we know is a big part of PTSD. I would say that the biggest potential drawback to massed treatment is the need to clear your schedule to attend multiple sessions during a week and complete assignments between sessions. For some people that just might not be doable.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

If I were a Veteran with PTSD or anyone with PTSD, really what should I be thinking about when choosing between standard versus massed PTSD treatment?

Dr. Jennifer Wachen:

At this point, we haven't found a particular type of person that this treatment would be better or worse for. So it's really up to the individual to decide which form of treatment is a better fit for them. Some people might really like the idea of completing therapy in such a short amount of time, but others may find that less appealing for various reasons. And also may be that logistical factors determine if more or less frequent sessions are more doable. If someone is able to clear their schedule to attend sessions more often, that might be a great option to complete treatment more quickly. But for some folks that may be hard to do depending on their other obligations.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I'm guessing some of our listeners might be interested in seeking a massed treatment for their PTSD. So how might they find a clinic or provider that offers this type of treatment?

Dr. Jennifer Wachen:

Well, Veterans are very fortunate in that most of the programs offering massed treatments are either within VA or in community programs, specifically serving Veterans such as the Warrior Care Network programs. All VAs offer evidence-based treatments for PTSD, and many of those are beginning to offer massed treatment delivery. If a Veteran's local VA is not offering this yet, it may be possible to get

massed treatment through virtual care from another program within VA. So, Veterans can ask their providers about this option. Non-veterans can seek out providers in the community who were trained in evidence-based treatments for PTSD and ask about the possibility of having multiple sessions per week.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Any tips for someone to get the most out of a massed PTSD treatment?

Dr. Jennifer Wachen:

Well, similar to someone engaging in standard treatment, it's important to commit to attending therapy regularly and completing assignments between sessions. With massed treatment in particular, making sure that you have time to attend more frequent sessions and complete assignments with less time between sessions is necessary. So you'll want to clear your schedule of other obligations as much as possible. Also, because the content of the therapy is moving more quickly in massed treatments, it's especially important to communicate with your provider if you're having any challenges with the treatment or the assignments so that any concerns are addressed quickly.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Can you recommend any digital resources to support someone completing a massed treatment?

Dr. Jennifer Wachen:

If someone's doing a massed version of cognitive processing therapy or prolonged exposure, there are free mobile apps called CPT Coach and PE Coach that can be used to support these therapies. The apps include mobile versions of the therapy materials and can help in completing homework assignments. The apps can also be used after treatment is completed to continue tracking symptoms and practicing the skills learned in therapy. Since massed treatment is completed in a short amount of time, one thing we're seeing is that people can continue to improve their symptoms even after finishing therapy. So using the apps to maintain these skills can be a really great way to continue to see benefits.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Fantastic. Well, that's all we have time for today. Thank you so much for joining us Dr. Wachen.

Dr. Jennifer Wachen:

Thanks so much for having me.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And as a reminder to our listeners, CPT Coach and PE Coach are both free apps that could be downloaded from the App store or Google Play. For more information about these apps and more from the National Center for PTSD, visit www.ptsd.va.gov/mobile.

Dr. Andrea Jamison:

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. Thank you for joining us.