

## PTSD Bytes Transcript

Episode #:	45
Topic:	How PTSD impacts work
Guest:	Elissa McCarthy, Ph.D.
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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 PTSD and the workplace. I'm joined today by Dr. Elissa McCarthy, who's a clinical psychologist and consultant with the National Center for PTSD's Consultation Program. She's also a national lead for the VA's Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia Program, and she joined us previously on the podcast to talk about PTSD and problems with sleep. Welcome to the podcast, Dr. McCarthy.

Dr. Elissa McCarthy:

Great. Thanks so much for inviting me back. It's good to be here again.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I'd like to start by discussing some of the difficulties that people with PTSD might face at work. What are some common workplace situations or even aspects of the work environment that may be challenging for individuals with PTSD?

Dr. Elissa McCarthy:

That's a great question. We know that there's 20 symptoms of PTSD and they can present in a lot of different ways, depending if someone has a symptom or not, and to what degree they experience it. One thing we've learned through research is that individuals who have higher symptom severity with PTSD, meaning they have a lot of symptoms and they're really impacting their life, also have a tendency to have greater difficulty finding a job and then maintaining that job. And so when we think about how PTSD may impact the workplace, there's a variety of different ways to be thinking about it. Let's think about someone who is working in a warehouse and they hear a really loud sound that's a pallet dropping. That individual may have a response to that that triggers a high level of physiological response, meaning their heart racing or other difficulties, and they may need to take some time outside of the work setting to bring down that increased anxiety. Individuals with PTSD may find that they avoid certain work duties, right? So let's say that you are doing deliveries, that's your employment, and you have an opportunity to increase your root and go into a more populated city, but you don't feel comfortable in those crowds, so you don't take on those additional duties.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Those are helpful examples of how PTSD symptoms can impact anxiety and stress in the workplace. But we also know that PTSD symptoms can impact relationships. So how might that play out in the workplace?

Dr. Elissa McCarthy:

In my work when working with clients who have PTSD, some of the things that I've been told is it's difficult to trust people because their trust was broken as a result of something that happened in their trauma. And so they may find that it's difficult to build trust in working relationships at work, and that can impact their experience in the workplace. I've worked with several clients who have PTSD and they'll say it's a lot easier for me to work alone than with others, and they may prefer to work independently rather than as a team. Another area that I have found PTSD impacts the workplace, and I really have learned this through my clinical work with veterans, is that they really worry about the misinformation about PTSD that's out there in the media, and what impact can that have on their ability to gain more opportunities within their employment, but also advance in their workplace.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

It's not just their symptoms that impact them, it's the stigma associated with PTSD. Can you say a little bit more about how fear of being stigmatized may impact their work experience?

Dr. Elissa McCarthy:

Yes, absolutely. One of the ways that comes up the most often in my work is difficulty advocating for oneself and in particular, asking for potential accommodations. I've heard from veterans that I work with that they say they're just trying to survive at work and that they're not thriving, and so some of the discussion around stigma is really important.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

What are some workplace accommodations that someone who has PTSD might want to advocate for?

Dr. Elissa McCarthy:

A couple examples that have recently come up is maybe considering asking your employer for a flexible work schedule, especially if you are in treatment for PTSD, to have that flexibility with work so you're able to get the treatment that you need to thrive. Sometimes it might be worth considering remote work options or a blended model of that where you're potentially going into the workplace some days and then working from a designated work location. Maybe it's your home or apartment or something like that. A little caveat with that piece of it around remote work with PTSD, we know that there can be a tendency to have avoidance creep in in a lot of different areas, as well as feeling isolated, and so when someone is thinking around alternatives to a traditional kind of work setting, you really want to make sure that it isn't contributing to increased feelings of isolation.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I appreciate you adding that caveat about remote work. I also think it's worth noting that some people work in jobs like the military or healthcare, other type of first responders or law enforcement in which they're regularly exposed to traumatic events, and this includes veterans who left the military but are now working in jobs where they're exposed to trauma. So what advice do you have for people in this situation who may be triggered by their work but still have a passion for it?

Dr. Elissa McCarthy:

I always encourage the veterans that I work with to recognize how much they bring to the civilian workforce. In particular, they have specialized training and skills that are unbelievably valuable and transferable. It's really important to find employment that you're passionate about, that you're dedicated to, and that can really find the value in what you bring to that workplace. You mentioned veterans going into professions related to law enforcement. One of the things that the National Center for PTSD has developed is a police toolkit. This is an online resource that's available for individuals in law enforcement related to a variety of things that may come up in particular about how to take care of yourself. So when you're in a high stress position, that may increase the likelihood to exposure to traumatic events or difficult situations, which happens frequently for those in law enforcement. How do you ensure you also take care of yourself in order to perform at your highest capabilities at work? Self-care is essential in all aspects of life, whether it's at work, whether it's with your family, and this toolkit can help you start to understand what happens when I'm stressed, what happens when I'm triggered? What do others notice? And so finding ways to take care of yourself when you work in an environment that is inherently stressful or you even work in a place that can result in a lot of stress, it's important to think about ways to make sure you take care of yourself. We have several apps through the National Center for PTSD that have some tools that can help with managing stress. One that comes to mind is the PTSD Coach. There's also COVID Coach that has coping tools, and they're even working on updating this app when you may need to take a break in the work environment or even after work and decompress. Mindfulness Coach can be a great resource to find ways to decompress from the stress and take care of yourself.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I appreciate you mentioning these apps, Dr. McCarthy and I do just want to reiterate that all the apps you mentioned, so that includes PTSD coach, COVID coach, and mindfulness coach are free and anyone can download them, not just veterans. Now, switching gears a little bit to take the manager's perspective, do you have any considerations or recommendations for managers or supervisors to address traumatic events or other critical incidents that have occurred in the workplace?

Dr. Elissa McCarthy:

I'm glad that you're bringing this up because events in the workplace that are traumatic do happen for managers. I encourage you to find ways to provide support to your employees, find ways to connect employees with benefits and other relevant resources, find ways to help your employees connect with each other as well as leadership at the job, and also come back to basics in regards to stress management and coping. One model that was developed by the National Center for PTSD is called Stress First Aid. This is a recovery model can be applied across various work settings as well as various types of incidents that a workplace may have experienced.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I appreciate you sharing about the stress first aid model. Is there anywhere that managers or supervisors can go to learn more online?

Dr. Elissa McCarthy:

Yeah. The National Center for PTSD has on their website information around stress first aid, and there's a lot of resources related to handouts, workbooks, manuals, tip sheets, really a variety of things that

you're looking for are available there or they provide links to other websites that are really vetted as having a good reputation and accurate information to share with you.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

that's all we have time for today. Dr. McCarthy, thank you so much for talking with us. You shared so many wonderful resources and we will be sure to link to all of them in our show notes.

Dr. Elissa McCarthy:

Thank you so much for having me today. I really appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts and resources with your listeners.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

As a reminder to our listeners, you can learn more about and find links to download PTSD Coach, COVID Coach and Mindfulness Coach at [www.ptsd.va.gov/mobile](http://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](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast). Thank you for joining us.