

PTSD Bytes – Audio Transcription

Episode #:	5
Guest:	Carmen McLean, PhD
Title:	#5: Treatments for PTSD 2: Prolonged Exposure

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 post-traumatic stress disorder, mental health, and self-care with a focus on free digital resources that can help. This is your host, Dr. Pearl McGee Vincent.

On today's episode, we'll be talking about an evidence-based treatment for PTSD. Our guest is Dr. Carmen McLean, a clinical psychologist at the National Center for PTSD and Clinical Associate Professor Affiliate at Stanford University. As PTSD treatment has developed, we now have effective therapies that work. Dr. McLean is here to talk with us about one such therapy, for which she is an expert, and that is called "prolonged exposure," sometimes abbreviated as "PE." Welcome Carmen!

Carmen:

Thank you, Pearl. Thanks for having me.

Pearl:

If someone is diagnosed with PTSD and signs up for prolonged exposure or PE, what can they expect? What does that mean?

Carmen:

Sure. Prolonged exposure is one of several trauma-focused psychotherapies for PTSD. So trauma-focused means that in the therapy, there's going to be some discussion of, or some approaching of thoughts, memories related to the trauma. Gradual and systematic approaching of trauma-related thoughts and memories.

Pearl:

So the exposure means that they're being exposed to thoughts and memories. Is that-, am I hearing that right? Like thoughts and memories of the trauma itself?

Carmen:

PE involves two different kind of exposure. So one type of exposure is called imaginal exposure and that's because it's exposing people to the memory of the trauma in their imagination. So for this piece of the treatment, the clients are invited to kind of think about the memory of the trauma, and to recount it out loud to their therapist. And they do that for a prolonged period, hence the name prolonged exposure. And then the other type of exposure that's part of PE is called in vivo exposure, and that means in real life exposure. And that part of the treatment involves approaching situations, people, places, things that have been difficult for the person to do or to be around because of the trauma, but that they would like to be able to do. So this is often things like, you know going out and being in a crowded place or maybe going somewhere where it reminds them of the trauma

Pearl:

Yeah, when you describe exposure, it sounds like doing things that are the exact opposite of what somebody with trauma would want to do. I mean, it sounds like, yeah. <laugh> yeah, it sounds really challenging.

Carmen:

Yes, usually people with PTSD are spending a lot of time and energy doing the opposite of exposure. I mean, the name of the therapy, prolonged exposure, I agree, it doesn't invite a lot of warm fuzzies <laugh> and it was named based on really just the procedure that's involved in this, in the therapy, which is approaching trauma related material. And you, you do do that for kind of a prolonged or like a repeated period of time. Often people with PTSD will have some appreciation, even though it's very difficult to think about the trauma memory or to go places where they're reminded of the memory, they can appreciate that the strategy of trying to avoid it doesn't work that well, at least in the long term. It can help people in the short term avoid discomfort. But as a long-term strategy, it doesn't really help people to lead full lives.

Pearl:

I like the way you framed that, that it's not just about approaching discomfort for the sake of being uncomfortable, but to be able to find a way of living that can help them have more of a meaningful and rich life.

Carmen:

Yeah. I also think the word exposure sounds like something is going to happen to you <laugh>. And what actually happens in PE is you would be working really closely with your therapist to decide what are the situations that you want to be able to go into and be comfortable again. And you are approaching trauma-related memories and thoughts and situations that likely will cause distress, but it's doing that in a safe environment with the support of your therapist and often doing that in a gradual way, so that you have an opportunity to learn that you actually can approach those things and your distress will come down. Particularly if you do that repeatedly, your distress will come down more and more quickly.

Pearl:

And if someone is interested in this treatment, in prolonged exposure, how can they get it, whether they're enrolled in VA healthcare, or if they're not in VA?

Carmen:

So if you're enrolled in VA care, you should have access to prolonged exposure. So I think it would be a great idea to ask your provider about that and see if you can get connected with somebody at your local VA, either in person or through telehealth. And then if you're not in VA, there are providers in the community that are trained to deliver PE. It can be a little bit trickier to find those providers. Some ideas include looking at therapist directories that are available through different professional organizations that support evidence-based practice. One of those is the Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies, or ABCT, has a therapist directory. The Anxiety Disorders Association of America also has a therapist directory.

Pearl:

And as you know, this podcast likes to bring it back to technology that can help. Tell us about any resources, mobile apps that you're aware of that are related to prolonged exposure.

Carmen:

So the only one that I'm aware of is PE Coach. That's publicly available. And this is a type of app that's called a treatment companion app. So it's not something people will download and go out and use completely on their own. It's an app that's designed to be used while you're in therapy. So if you're about start PE with somebody, you might want to ask them about PE Coach because that can be a really nice tool to have while you're doing the therapy. PE Coach, it provides a way of recording the sessions. it provides a way of tracking your progress while you're engaged in PE to make sure your symptoms are coming down.

Pearl:

I think the fear that I hear most often about PE or about anybody starting therapy really is, I'm worried it's going to make me feel worse. And one thing I've heard therapists say, I've heard myself say as a therapist, is that there is sometimes a period at the beginning where things get challenging before they get better. Can you speak to that at all?

Carmen:

Sure. this has actually been, been studied where they've looked at, how often does this really happen, where people have an increase in their symptoms when they start PE. People might be surprised to learn that it's actually a minority of clients that start PE their PTSD symptoms actually increase at the beginning phase of treatment, but that can happen. So I would say, it is a valid concern. It does sometimes happen. It doesn't mean you will not do very well in therapy. And, if you think about how you know, avoidance is really part of PTSD, it, it does kind of make sense that in any trauma-focused psychotherapy, there could be a bit of an increase at the, at the outset, because you're really taking a different approach.

Pearl:

Is there anything else that you would like our listeners to know about prolonged exposure treatment for PTSD?

Carmen:

The thing that comes to mind is I feel really strongly about this being a really, really powerful therapeutic approach that is kind of underutilized because people, including providers sometimes, um, worry that it might be too difficult. And the thing I would like to say is that just my experience and the research evidence really don't support that concern as much as you might think. What we know from many, many, many different studies that have been done of different psychotherapy approaches is that trauma-focused therapies like prolonged exposure tend to work really, really well for people with PTSD that's associated with a range of different traumatic events. If you're somebody that has PTSD, I would really encourage you to look into it and to consider it. People are able to make amazing progress and really recover. I've seen it, the research supports that. And I just wish it was even more used than it is already because I'm a real believer of exposure.

Pearl:

Thank you, Dr. McLean for joining us and sharing your expertise.

Carmen:

Thanks so much for having me.

Pearl:

For anyone who wants to learn even more about prolonged exposure, check out the show notes for links to the National Center for PTSD website and related YouTube videos. For anyone providing or receiving prolonged exposure, the mobile app PE Coach is free and available to you wherever you get your apps.

This has been an episode of PTSD Bytes, the podcast that delivers bite-sized expertise on issues related to PTSD, mental health and technology. Look out for new episodes, which are released every other week. Thank you for joining us.