

PTSD Bytes – Transcript

Episode #:	9
Title:	#9: What is Trauma?
Guest(s):	Debra Kaysen, Ph.D.

Pearl:

Welcome and thank you for tuning in to PTSD Bytes, the podcast where we invite experts to talk about PTSD and mental health and how technology like mental health apps can help. We'll cover a new topic every other week in bite-sized episodes. I'm your host, Pearl McGee-Vincent, and I'm a clinical psychologist at the Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD.

Pearl:

Today, I'll be talking with Dr. Debra Kaysen, who is a psychologist at Stanford University and a research scientist with us here at the National Center for PTSD. She studies treatment for PTSD, with a wide variety of people and different types of trauma. Welcome Dr. Kaysen.

Debra:

Thank you so much. I'm excited to be here.

Pearl:

Well, I am so excited to have you here with us today talking about trauma as a trauma expert. Now we hear that word all the time now in the media, in the news and sometimes it's used more, even in our everyday conversations. So we know it's a term that's being used maybe in different ways than it was originally intended to be used, or is used by experts. Can you share with us what you are talking about as a, as a trauma researcher and expert when you refer to trauma?

Debra:

Absolutely. And I love that question because it comes up so much. You can almost think about it like, there are big T traumas and little t traumas. Little t traumas are really stressful events. They may be losses. It could be really severe things like not knowing where you're going to find money to pay your rent or how to feed your kids. So they're more like stressors. And they may be very big stressors. When I'm talking about big T traumas, I'm talking more about threats to somebody's life. I'm talking more about threats to somebody's bodily integrity, like a sexual assault. And things that people either directly experienced or may have witnessed.

Pearl:

That's a really helpful distinction. And the way that you're describing little t trauma makes me feel like any of us probably will experience a little t trauma in our life, whether it's a really stressful situation or loss of a loved one. Now with those big T traumas, are certain people more likely than others to experience big T traumas? Or who's at risk? Can anybody experience a big T trauma?

Debra:

Absolutely. Big T traumas, you know, we used to think about them as things that were unusual. But the reality is that many people have experienced those big T traumas. And there are unfortunately some folks who are more at risk. People who are already struggling, maybe with mental health problems or

substance use, they have somewhat increased risk. Or there may be certain times during people's lives where they're more likely to experience certain kinds of big T traumas. So for example, late adolescence, early adulthood is a period of time where women may be more at risk for experiencing sexual traumas. So it changes over the course of someone's life. It changes based on their gender, their race or ethnicity, their sexual orientation. But the reality is we also can all be exposed to those traumatic events. And that can be kind of scary to sit with at times.

Pearl:

Yeah. And you mentioned that a common misconception is that big T traumas are rare and in fact, many people might experience a big T trauma in their lifetime. What are some other misconceptions that you've heard or would like to correct about trauma?

Debra:

I think the biggest one that I hear is that if somebody experiences a big T trauma, that they're going to necessarily have symptoms, like what we call posttraumatic stress disorder. And so often I'll hear people assume because I had this really awful thing happen, it means I'm going to have some kinds of mental health concerns or mental health difficulties. Now you might in the first few days afterwards, but for many people, people are resilient and many people seem to get better all by themselves, even without ever seeing somebody like me. And so remembering that trauma doesn't necessarily equal a lifetime of suffering can be really helpful to know. So that's one misconception. Another misconception is that if you have those kinds of difficulties, that's it, you're stuck with 'em. And the reality is we have lots of different ways of helping people recover from those events. So they don't have to keep carrying that burden around with them.

Pearl:

That's great to know that recovery is possible and that people do get better with treatment. Can you clarify what the difference is between trauma and PTSD?

Debra:

It's a great question. So trauma is something that happens to you. PTSD are a collection of symptoms or reactions that can happen to someone who's experienced a trauma. And those reactions, especially right after a traumatic event are really common. Most people, if it's a severe event, have those kinds of reactions, they include things like having memories you can't keep out of your head, maybe having nightmares about it, getting really upset if something reminds you of it. It's also things like having trouble concentrating, having trouble sleeping, maybe feeling really jumpy. You might feel really guilty or ashamed. It may be harder to have happy feelings. You may try to push the feelings away. So that collection or constellation of reactions is what mental health professionals call PTSD.

Pearl:

Thank you. That really helps to make that clear. And you've worked with people all around the world from different types of backgrounds and populations. What can you say about PTSD and how it shows up in different people? Is it the same for everyone?

Debra:

It's a great question. I would say it's similar. There are a lot more similarities between us on this planet than there are differences. And many of those kinds of reactions we see across people all over the world, those reactions look really similar.

Pearl:

I'm thinking of people who are experiencing ongoing trauma, maybe they're in a war zone or experiencing ongoing threats of violence due to different circumstances. What is your opinion about treatment for people who are still at risk of experiencing trauma? They're not quite able to get away from it. Can they still get treatment, even though they might be exposed to repeated traumas?

Debra:

Yeah. This is a place where my thinking certainly has changed. Back in the Dark Ages, when I was in graduate school, we were always taught that you couldn't treat PTSD unless the person was post-trauma. And in doing work in the Democratic Republic of Congo with sexual assault survivors, where the question was, could we treat folks in these settings safely? And what are the consequences if you don't? Because it wasn't like in those settings, there was going to be a clear post-trauma period. And what we found was that people got better. Even in high complex settings, people improved.

Pearl:

That's fascinating and not necessarily what you would expect. It's good to know that folks can recover even in those circumstances.

Debra:

It's hopeful.

Pearl:

One of the things that we like to do on this podcast is we like to also refer our listeners to tools or resources that they can go to if they want to get more information, if they want to check out ways that they can start to explore self-help for some of these issues. Do you have any recommendations for online tools, apps, or other resources that our listeners can check out?

Debra:

Absolutely. So things like PTSD Coach is fantastic. It's got a number of different coping skills that people can use. So that's a great resource. I just launched an app that is-, technically, it's a web app, so you don't need to download anything. It was developed for healthcare workers, but it's got some nice tools that could work for folks who are having problems. And so that's at pam.stanford.edu They have some really nice resource in there for people who may be concerned.

Pearl:

Thank you. And thank you so much for joining us today, Dr. Kaysen.

Debra:

It has been a delight.

Pearl:

On today's episode. Dr. Kaysen mentioned a few resources, including the PTSD Coach mobile app, which can be found if you search for it by name, PTSD Coach, in the App store or Google Play.

This has been an episode of PTSD Bytes. The podcast that delivers bite-sized expertise on issues related to PTSD, mental health and technology. Catch new episodes every other week by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Thank you for joining us.