PTSD & the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Our Agenda

- Introduction: Stress & Trauma
- Impact of the Pandemic
- Common Reactions to Trauma
- Symptoms of PTSD
- Questions & Discussion
- Overview of PTSD Treatment
- Evidence-Based Psychotherapies
- Review of Resources
- Questions & Discussion
Basic Terminology

- **Stressor**: undesired or challenging experience that results in physical and/or psychological tension and typically impacts quality of life

- **Traumatic Stressor**: experience involving actual or possible death, serious injury or sexual violence and typically involves a period of adjustment after exposure

- **Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**: mental health condition in which trauma reactions become pervasive, impair functioning and typically requires treatment in order to resolve
COVID-19: Potential Ongoing Stressors

- Continued concerns about CV-19 (e.g., length of immunity, variants of virus)
- Re-openings and returning to in-person events (e.g., work, school, recreation, travel)
- Consequences of specific pandemic-related stressors (e.g., loss & grief, fiscal, professional, academic)
- Balancing family and caregiving duties with professional commitments

FIELDING, 2021; GORDON & MCGIFFIN, 2021; PAPPAS, 2021; IMAGE BY FREEPIK
COVID-19: Mental Health Impact

- Pandemic-related issues remain an ongoing source of stress for many adults:
  - *APA Stress in America:*

- Approximately 30% of U.S. adults continue to report symptoms of anxiety and depression:
  - *Household Pulse Survey:*
    [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm)

- Ongoing mental health impact may make it more difficult to cope with current or new stressors

APA, 2022; CDC, 2022; IMAGE BY GERD ALTMANN FROM PIXABAY
COVID-19: Potential Traumatic Stressors

- CV-19 survivors who experienced imminent life threat due to severe respiratory illness
- HCW or first responders who experienced exposure to severely ill or dying CV-19 patients
- HCW who experienced exposure to CV-19 patients without adequate PPE
- Family member or close friend of CV-19 patient who witnessed or learned of their extreme anxiety/panic or imminent fear of death during severe respiratory illness

ISTSS, 2021; NORRHOLM ET AL, 2021; IMAGE BY CROMACONCEPTOVISUAL FROM PIXABAY
Trauma Reactions

- **Common reactions:**
  - Fear and anxiety
  - Frequent thoughts & images of trauma
  - Avoiding trauma reminders
  - Disrupted sleep & nightmares
  - Feeling jumpy or on guard
  - Difficulty concentrating
  - Changed views of self, other & world
  - Feeling detached from others
  - Relationship difficulties
  - Problems at work or school

- **Emotional reactions:**
  - Anger & irritability
  - Guilt, shame & self-blame
  - Sadness & grief
  - Helplessness
  - Feeling numb (lack of emotion)

- **Physical reactions:**
  - GI distress
  - Headaches & muscle tension
  - Rapid heart rate & breathing
  - Low energy or fatigue
  - Increased substance use or food intake
  - Worsening of medical conditions

NCPTSD; ROTHBAUM & RAUCH, 2020
Natural Recovery

- Research indicates the most common response to trauma is resilience and recovery
- Recovery is a slow and gradual process that begins after trauma exposure
- Trauma reactions are typically short-term and reduce in frequency & intensity over time
- Most individuals do not experience long-term difficulties or impaired functioning following a trauma

ISTSS, 2020; NCPTSD; IMAGE BY SMSHOOT FROM ISTOCK
Risk Factors for PTSD

- **Pre-trauma risk factors:**
  - Current or previous mental health issues
  - Previous trauma or traumas
  - Family history of mental health issues

- **Trauma risk factors:**
  - Specific types of trauma
  - Believing your life is under threat
  - Sustaining physical injury
  - Experiencing dissociation

- **Post-trauma risk factors:**
  - Lack of social support or negative interactions
  - Increased life stress
  - Relying on avoidance as primary means of coping

ISTSS, 2020; ROTHBAUM & RAUCH, 2020; IMAGE BY GSTUDIOIMAGEN FROM FREEPIK
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

- Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence that may occur by:
  - Directly experiencing trauma
  - Witnessing (in person) the trauma occurring to others
  - Learning the trauma occurred to close family member or friend
  - Experiencing repeated exposure to aversive details of trauma (e.g., first responders)

- Symptoms associated with the trauma include:
  - Re-experiencing the trauma
  - Avoidance of trauma reminders
  - Negative thoughts & emotions
  - Increased arousal

DSM-V-TR, 2022; IMAGE BY TATYANA LARINA FROM ISTOCK
Re-Experiencing the Trauma

- Intrusive memories, thoughts or images of the trauma
- Trauma-related nightmares
- Flashbacks: feeling as if the trauma is happening to you again
- Strong emotional reactions when you encounter trauma reminders
- Strong physical reactions when you encounter trauma reminders
Avoidance of Trauma Reminders

- Memories, thoughts and feelings associated with the trauma
- Talking about the trauma
- People, places, things, situations or activities associated with the trauma
- People, places, things, situations or activities that now feel unsafe or threatening since the trauma
- Keeping yourself very busy and distracted to avoid idle time or idle mind
Negative Thoughts & Feelings

- Negative views of self, others & the world
- Negative emotions such as sadness, anger, guilt and shame
- Feeling numb (lack of emotion) or unable to experience positive emotions
- Detached or disconnected from others
- Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy
- Unable to remember parts of the trauma
Increased Arousal

- Feeling “on guard” or “on edge”
- Jumpy or easily startled
- Difficulty concentrating
- Sleep disruption
- Irritability or anger outbursts
- Engaging in more risky behaviors than before the trauma (e.g., increased substance use, driving aggressively)
Assessing PTSD

- PTSD is assessed and diagnosed by a mental health professional.
- Assessment includes an interview in which you’ll be asked about events that may have been traumatic for you as well as difficulties you’ve experienced since these events.
- You may be asked to complete surveys or questionnaires about your symptoms as well.
- Feel free to ask questions beforehand so you know what to expect during the evaluation.
- Accurate diagnosis is essential in determining appropriate treatment options.
Questions & Discussion
Why should I consider treatment?

- There is no need to live with the negative impact PTSD has on your life.
- Effective treatments for PTSD are available.
- For most people, treatment results in decreased symptoms and improved quality of life:
  - Better understanding of the trauma and its impact
  - Develop skills to more effectively handle upsetting thoughts and feelings
  - Re-engage and connect with family and friends
  - Set new goals for yourself that are attainable
- Choosing to engage in treatment creates a new opportunity for recovery & regaining your life
What is “evidence-based” treatment?

- **Evidence-based treatment (EBT):** proven to be effective through rigorous scientific research
  - Multiple large-scale studies
  - Objectively evaluated
  - Published in peer reviewed journals

- **Leading evidence-based PTSD treatments:**
  - Psychotherapy (“talk therapy”)
    - [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand_tx/talk_therapy.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand_tx/talk_therapy.asp)
  - Medication
    - [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand_tx/medications.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand_tx/medications.asp)
What happens in treatment?

- **Trauma-focused psychotherapy:**
  - Focuses on your memory of the trauma or the meaning of the trauma
  - Utilize different techniques to help you process the trauma

- **Leading trauma-focused psychotherapies:**
  - Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE)
  - Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)
  - Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing (EMDR)

- **Individual psychotherapy:** meeting one-on-one with a therapist
  - **Time-limited:** typically meet once a week for up to 3-4 months
  - **Potential risks:** mild to moderate discomfort when approaching trauma-related things you typically avoid that dissipates over time

- **Importance of homework:** practicing new skills outside of session to decrease the negative impact of PTSD in your daily life
Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE)

- **How does it work?** Helps you approach trauma-related memories, feelings and situations you avoid. As you experience these things and talk about them in session, you learn there is no need to avoid them and symptoms decrease.

- **How long does it take?** 90min sessions for 8 to 15 weeks

- **What will I do in therapy?**
  - Think about trauma memory and talk about details of your trauma in session (**imaginal exposure**) and then discuss this experience with your therapist.
  - Make list of trauma-related things you avoid and gradually approach them in your daily life (**in vivo exposure**). Discuss these experiences with your therapist and decide together which new things to approach each week.

- **What will I do between sessions?**
  - Listen to audio recording of you talking about your trauma (**imaginal exposure**)
  - Practice approaching trauma-related things you avoid (**in vivo exposure**)

**NCPTSD Resources:**
- **Article:** [https://www ptsd va gov/understand tx/prolonged exposure asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand_tx/prolonged_exposure.asp)
- **Video:** [https://www media eo va gov/ptsd/mp4/Whiteboard PE mp4](https://www.media.eo.va.gov/ptsd/mp4/Whiteboard PE.mp4)

NCPTSD; ROTHBAUM & RAUCH, 2020; IMAGE BY ELENABS FROM ISTOCK
Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)

- **How does it work?** Helps you learn to identify and change the extreme negative thoughts you’ve had since the trauma. As you change these unhelpful thoughts, your feelings change as well and symptoms decrease.

- **How long does it take?** 60min sessions for ~12 weeks

- **What will I do in therapy?**
  - Write about and discuss in what ways the trauma changed how you think about yourself, others and the world
  - Learn skills that help you recognize unhelpful thoughts, examine alternative perspectives and choose more balanced thoughts that result in less intense negative emotions

- **What will I do between sessions?**
  - Complete worksheets that help you practice these skills in your daily life

- **NCPTSD Resources:**
  - Article: [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand_tx/cognitive_processing.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand_tx/cognitive_processing.asp)
  - Video: [https://www.media.eo.va.gov/ptsd/mp4/Whiteboard_CPT.mp4](https://www.media.eo.va.gov/ptsd/mp4/Whiteboard_CPT.mp4)
Eye Movement Desensitization & Reprocessing (EMDR)

- **How does it work?** Helps you process distressing thoughts, emotions and physical sensations associated with the trauma memory. As these experiences are processed and distress declines, symptoms decrease.

- **How long will it take?** 50-90min sessions for 4 to 12 weeks

- **What will I do in therapy?**
  - Think about the trauma memory while focusing on a specific movement or sound and then discuss this experience with your therapist
  - As the trauma memory becomes less distressing over time, you then focus on a positive thought or feeling while thinking about the trauma memory

- **What will I do between sessions?** No homework outside of therapy sessions

- **NCPTSD Resources:**
  - **Article:** [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand_tx/emdr.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand_tx/emdr.asp)
  - **Video:** [https://www.media.eo.va.gov/PTSD/mp4/VA_Video01_EMDR_VFinal_NoAudioDescribe.mp4](https://www.media.eo.va.gov/PTSD/mp4/VA_Video01_EMDR_VFinal_NoAudioDescribe.mp4)

NCPTSD; ROTHBAUM & RAUCH, 2020; IMAGE BY LAURENCE SOULEZ FROM ISTOCK
Professional Assistance

- Potential indicators: excessive symptoms, subjective distress, impaired daily functioning, compromised relationships, and/or safety concerns
- Many evidence-based therapies are available for a range of issues (e.g., PTSD, anxiety, depression, prolonged grief, insomnia)

- **NCPTSD: Types of Therapists**
  [https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand_tx/types_therapist.asp](https://www.ptsd.va.gov/understand_tx/types_therapist.asp)

- **Psychology Today: Find a Therapist**

- **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline**
  [https://988lifeline.org/](https://988lifeline.org/)
Resource

*Title:* PTSD: What Everyone Needs to Know

*Authors:* Barbara O. Rothbaum & Sheila A. M. Rauch

*Amazon:* 

NCPTSD Resources

For the public:
- Family & Friends: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/family/effects_ptsd.asp

For professionals:
- Assessment: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/assessment/overview/index.asp
- Treatment: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/treat/txessentials/index.asp
- Continuing Ed: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/consult/index.asp
- Consultation: https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/consult/index.asp
Additional Resources

- **International Society of Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS)**
  - For the public:
    - Resources: [https://istss.org/public-resources](https://istss.org/public-resources)
  - For professionals:
    - Clinical resources: [https://istss.org/clinical-resources](https://istss.org/clinical-resources)
    - Education & Research: [https://istss.org/education-research](https://istss.org/education-research)

- **National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)**
  - Home page: [https://www.nctsn.org/](https://www.nctsn.org/)

Contact Information

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In Conclusion...

- Trauma exposure is not rare but most individuals will naturally recover on their own without long-term difficulties.
- PTSD may develop when the natural recovery process is disrupted and trauma reactions become chronic and impairing.
- Effective, evidence-based treatments for PTSD are available.
- Choosing to engage in PTSD treatment creates a new opportunity for recovery.
- Treatment often involves learning and practicing new skills in your daily life where they will benefit you the most.
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- Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies. *Deciding when to seek treatment*. https://www.abct.org/Information/?m=mInformation&fa=DecidingWhenToSeek


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