

Treatment of Complex PTSD: Results from the ISTSS Expert Consensus Study on Best Practices

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This study provides a summary of the results of an expert opinion survey initiated by the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies Complex Trauma Task Force regarding best practices for the treatment of complex posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Ratings from a mail-in survey from 25 complex PTSD experts and 25 classic PTSD experts regarding the most appropriate treatment approaches and interventions for complex PTSD were examined for areas of consensus and disagreement. Experts agreed on several aspects of treatment, with 84% endorsing a phase-based or sequenced therapy as the most appropriate treatment approach with interventions tailored to specific symptom sets. First-line interventions matched to specific symptoms included emotion regulation strategies, narration of trauma memory, cognitive restructuring, anxiety and stress management, and interpersonal skills. Meditation and mindfulness interventions were frequently identified as an effective second-line approach for emotional, attentional, and behavioral (e.g., aggression) disturbances. Agreement was not obtained on either the expected course of improvement or on duration of treatment. The survey results provide a strong rationale for conducting research focusing on the relative merits of traditional trauma-focused therapies and sequenced multicomponent approaches applied to different patient populations with a range of symptom profiles. Sustained symptom monitoring during the course of treatment and during extended follow-up would advance knowledge about both the speed and durability of treatment effects.

Keywords: complex PTSD, expert consensus, best practices, treatment, PTSD

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complex PTSD (Keane, 2000). Although first-line, data on the effectiveness of a sequenced approach to the treatment of complex PTSD are limited. The current study examined the results of an expert opinion survey regarding best practices for the treatment of complex PTSD. The survey results provide a strong rationale for conducting research focusing on the relative merits of traditional trauma-focused therapies and sequenced multicomponent approaches applied to different patient populations with a range of symptom profiles. Sustained symptom monitoring during the course of treatment and during extended follow-up would advance knowledge about both the speed and durability of treatment effects.

1992). Following DSM-IV criteria, the study included a D-PTSD (PTSD) (Pech, Van Der Kolk, Runtz, Maeder, Kessler, & Resick, 1997). A review of the DSM-IV criteria for PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) revealed that the criteria for PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) included the following: (a) exposure to a traumatic event, (b) re-experiencing the event, (c) avoidance of stimuli associated with the event, (d) negative alterations in mood and cognition, (e) increased arousal, and (f) duration of symptoms for more than 1 month.

American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 2000, 70, 465). The prevalence of PTSD in combat veterans is estimated to be 15% to 20% (Foa et al., 1999). The prevalence of PTSD in civilian populations is estimated to be 8% to 15% (Foa et al., 1999). The prevalence of PTSD in children and adolescents is estimated to be 1% to 5% (Foa et al., 1999).

According to the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), PTSD is characterized by the presence of one or more of the following symptoms: (a) re-experiencing the traumatic event through flashbacks, nightmares, or intrusive thoughts; (b) avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma; (c) negative alterations in mood and cognition; and (d) increased arousal and reactivity. The symptoms must be present for at least one month and cause significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

In addition to the DSM-IV-TR criteria, the ICD-10 (World Health Organization, 1992) defines PTSD as a condition characterized by the presence of one or more of the following symptoms: (a) re-experiencing the traumatic event through flashbacks, nightmares, or intrusive thoughts; (b) avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma; (c) negative alterations in mood and cognition; and (d) increased arousal and reactivity. The symptoms must be present for at least one month and cause significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

Research has shown that PTSD is associated with a variety of physical and psychological health problems. For example, individuals with PTSD are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders. Additionally, PTSD is associated with increased risk of cardiovascular disease, chronic pain, and other medical conditions. The prevalence of PTSD in the general population is estimated to be 8% to 15% (Foa et al., 1999).

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Approach	95% Confidence interval									Experts' ratings (%)			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	3 rd line			2 nd line			1 st line			1 st line	2 nd line	3 rd line		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9					
Sequenced treatment										8.0	1.6	85	15	0
Primarily coping skills										5.3	2.2	34	40	26
Combine processing and skills										4.3	2.4	27	23	50
Primarily memory processing										4.7	1.2	29	47	24

	95% Confidence interval									Experts' ratings (%)						
	3 rd line			2 nd line			1 st line			M	SD	1 st line	2 nd line	3 rd line		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9							
Acceptability																
Education about trauma										8.0	1.4	86	14	0		

Treatment of First-Episode and Second-Episode Traumatic Stress

Mental Disorder	First-Episode	Second-Episode
Recurrent	Education about trauma Narrative-focused	Cognitive Exposure Adequate
Acute/Chronic	Education about trauma Exposure	Cognitive Narrative-focused Medication/meditation Lifestyle changes
Hereditary	Education about trauma Exposure Adequate	Narrative-focused Cognitive
Affected	Education about trauma Exposure	(abuse)-250.4(-)-0.2(a)]TJ16.8001 -1.1997 TD-

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	95% Confidence interval									Experts' ratings (%)				
	3 rd line			2 nd line			1 st line			1 st line	2 nd line	3 rd line		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9					
Format for initial phase of treatment														
Individual										8.7	0.6	100	0	0
Individual + group										6.7	2.1	67	23	10
Group (structured)										6.4	2.3	59	27	14
Group (open)										3.7	1.9	6	42	52
Self-help										3.3	1.6	4	35	61
Format for processing trauma memories														
Individual										8.6	0.6	100	0	0
Combined										6.3	2.4	52	33	15
Group										3.5	2.1	8	41	51

Figure 5. Ratings for effectiveness of each format for initial phase of treatment and for processing trauma memories.

are more effective than self-help (see also the meta-analysis by van der Bruggen et al., 2008).

The meta-analysis also found that the most effective format for processing trauma memories is individual therapy. This is in line with the findings of the meta-analysis by van der Bruggen et al. (2008), who found that individual therapy is the most effective format for processing trauma memories. The meta-analysis also found that the most effective format for processing trauma memories is individual therapy. This is in line with the findings of the meta-analysis by van der Bruggen et al. (2008), who found that individual therapy is the most effective format for processing trauma memories.

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Ratings for effectiveness of each format for processing trauma memories are shown in Figure 5. The meta-analysis also found that the most effective format for processing trauma memories is individual therapy. This is in line with the findings of the meta-analysis by van der Bruggen et al. (2008), who found that individual therapy is the most effective format for processing trauma memories.

