Trauma Survivors: Information about PTSD, Complex PTSD, and Self Care

What is PTSD and who does it affect?

- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is type of anxiety disorder that can occur after seeing or experiencing a traumatic event. Most people feel afraid after witnessing something traumatic, but eventually those fears lessen. PTSD occurs when an individual continues to feel afraid long after the danger has abated. This happens when our brain becomes almost too good at protecting us - it begins to see danger in places and things it never had before. This causes our body to constantly prepare to either fight, flee, or freeze. Being stuck in this state of fear can be debilitating and can interfere with relationships, work and one’s ability to care for oneself.

- Symptoms of PTSD include: re-experiencing the traumatic event (flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, nightmares), feeling emotionally numb, staying away from people and places that bring back memories of the event, depression, memory lapses around the event, feelings of being on edge and alert for danger, and having a startle response things that other people may not respond to (loud noises, unexpected touch).

- PTSD is not limited to members of the armed forces. Anyone who experiences a traumatic event – car accident, combat, sudden death of a loved one, assault – can develop PTSD. Sometimes people develop PTSD when they are told about a traumatic event that someone close to them has experienced. The way that an individual develops PTSD does not have any influence on the validity of the symptoms that follow. There is no trauma that is “better” or “worse”; your experience is what matters.

The above information (and more) can be found on the National Institute of Mental Health website. Visit https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/index.shtml

What is Complex PTSD?

- When we think of PTSD, we often think about a single traumatic event precipitating the development of the disorder. Some people experience traumatic events repeatedly over a long period of time (prisoners of war, victims of child abuse and victims of intimate partner violence). When this happens, our brains believe that there is no escape from the danger; this alters the way we view ourselves and the world.

- People with complex PTSD will have the same symptoms as those with PTSD, but may also have trouble regulating his/her/their emotions, have trouble forming close relationships, have a distorted perception of self and have large gaps in memory (months or years) around the time of the trauma.

- Complex PTSD is not an official diagnosis, but it is often used by medical professionals to describe the effects of chronic trauma. This is a topic of ongoing research in the field of psychiatry.

The above information (and more) can be found on the US Department of Veterans Affairs Website. Visit https://www.ptsd.va.gov/professional/ptsd-overview/complex-ptsd.asp.
**Mindfulness Exercises**

- Sit in a chair and take a few deep breaths. In your mind (or out loud) describe the way your body feels sitting chair underneath you. Pay attention to the way your feet feel on the floor. Try to be very descriptive of the sensations you are feeling. The more detail you can gather about what your body is feeling, the more grounded you will feel.
- Engage your senses: pick a color and look around the room - name as many objects of that color that you can see. Next go on to your sense of hearing – name three things you can hear in the current moment. Repeat with your senses of touch and smell. Repeat this entire exercise until you feel calmer and more grounded.
- Pay attention to your breath – the way it feels going in through your mouth/nose, the way it feels inside your body and the way it feels leaving.
- Stand on one foot and toss a ball with another person. Once you become efficient at this – toss the ball a little out of reach so each of you have to stretch and reach for the ball.

**Flashback Protocol/Grounding Technique**

Flashback halting protocol is used as a quick grounding technique that can help bring the mind’s focus back to the present moment.

**Say the following sentences filling in the blanks, following the instructions:**

“Right now I am feeling ______ (name the current emotion, usually fear)
and I am sensing in my body ______, (describe current bodily sensations in detail),
because I am remembering ______. (name the trauma by title, only — no details).
And, at the same time, I am looking around where I am now in ______ (say the year),
here ______ , (name the place where you are)
and I can see ______. (describe some of the things that you see right now, in this place),
and so I know ______, (name the trauma again) is not happening now/anymore.”


**For More information on PTSD and Complex PTSD**

**Note:** these books are best read while working with a therapist in order to help deal with symptoms they may trigger

1. *The Body Keeps Score* by Bessel van der Kolk
2. National Institute of Mental Health website [search for PTSD]
3. *The Complex PTSD Workbook* by Arielle Schwarts, PhD
4. *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith L. Herman
5. *Coping With Trauma Related Dissociation* by Suzette Boon, Kathy Steele, and Onno Van Der Hart
6. *The PTSD Workbook* by Beth Williams, PhD and Soili Poijula PhD