

## INFORMATION ABOUT COMPLEX PTSD FOR FAMILIES

This resource is intended to help families of survivors understand more about Complex PTSD and be aware that the trauma experienced by their loved one can affect them in certain ways. As a result, it is not only the survivor who may need treatment/support, but partners and children as well.

### What is Complex PTSD?

Complex PTSD is a psychological stress injury caused by ongoing or repeated trauma from which there is no real or perceived means of escape. There are different types of Complex Trauma that can lead to the development of Complex PTSD including *relational* (sexual/physical/emotional abuse and/or neglect/abandonment), *community/group* (racism, religious persecution), and *natural disasters* (catastrophic weather events, pandemics).

Out of the Storm is for adults dealing with Complex PTSD that developed in response to *relational* trauma. That is, ongoing abuse/neglect perpetrated by someone of interpersonal significance to the survivor (e.g., parent, partner, employer, coach, teacher, religious leader). Complex PTSD may develop at any time during the lifespan from childhood to adulthood. Some mental health professionals refer to Complex PTSD that develops in childhood as Developmental Trauma Disorder.

Relational trauma may be overt and severe as in incest, domestic violence or torture, or it may be covert and more nuanced (e.g., a parent who has Narcissistic Personality Disorder and uses their children as a source of attention; coercive control by a partner, unwanted sexualized attention; covert pressure/harassment in the workplace). Whatever the case, this form (i.e., relational) of Complex Trauma can have lasting and debilitating psychological and physical effects.

### Is Complex PTSD the same as PTSD?

No. PTSD is the result of short term or single traumatic incidents (e.g., rape, being the victim of a crime or accident) that lead to the development of three symptoms. Complex PTSD, on the other hand, involves repeated or ongoing trauma and results in six symptoms (Hyland et al, 2017). The three symptoms shared by Complex PTSD and PTSD include:

- **RE** – Re-experiencing the trauma in the present (visual/emotional flashbacks; nightmares)
- **AV** – Avoidance of traumatic reminders (thoughts, people, places, things; tendency to dissociate/numb out/self-medicate when stressed or triggered)
- **SOT** – Persistent sense of threat (hypervigilant, heightened startle response)

Complex PTSD has three additional symptoms which deeply affect one's sense of self. These include:

- **AD** – Affective dysregulation (heightened/flattened anger, sadness, joy)
- **NSC** – Negative self-concept (shame, critical of self/others; feelings of inferiority)
- **DR** – Disturbed relationships (difficulty with intimacy; a tendency to isolate; feeling different than others; social anxiety)

In the case of Complex PTSD then one's sense of safety in the world and sense of self are affected. As such, it is understandable that different treatment is required for Complex PTSD than for PTSD.

## Trauma Informed Treatment

In the case of Complex PTSD, time does NOT heal all wounds. Ongoing trauma is cumulative and becomes deeply embodied in the heart (emotions/spirit/sense of self), the mind and the body. Trauma survivors cannot simply “let it go” or “get over it” however much they may wish to do so. Complex PTSD requires compassionate and trauma informed treatment and self-care to heal.

Unfortunately, until quite recently Complex PTSD was often treated as PTSD. This meant treatment was not as relevant and/or effective as needed. The good news is trauma informed therapy specifically for Complex PTSD *is* becoming more widely available. Many therapists have turned virtual therapy since the COVID pandemic which means treatment is even more accessible. For additional information about trauma informed treatment and searchable databases for therapy please see <http://www.outofthestorm.website/treatment/>.

## What about me/my children?

Given that survivors often struggle with relationships and trust, it is understandable these issues may impact family members. Until quite recently, there has been scant attention paid to the fact that a survivor’s struggles with Complex PTSD can have a ripple effect in the family. This has led to calls for family-oriented trauma informed treatment and services. Being more knowledgeable and open about the survivor’s trauma and working together with a counselor or therapist can promote healthy, positive functioning within the family and enhance the survivor’s recovery. In addition to support groups for family members, more professionals are providing trauma informed counseling for couples and/or families. See our searchable therapist/counselor/group support databases at <http://www.outofthestorm.website/treatment/>.

**Further Information** – Please visit *Out of the Storm* at <http://www.outofthestorm.website/> for additional information and resources. You can also search Complex PTSD and parenting or families as there is lots of information available online.

**Reference** - Hyland, P., Shevlin, M., Elklit, A., Murphy, J., Vallières, F., Garvert, D. W., & Cloitre, M. (2017). An assessment of the construct validity of the ICD-11 proposal for Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, And Policy*, doi:10.1037/tra0000114