

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: What will be expected of me?

A: In PE, you will work with your provider to establish goals for treatment, learn about PTSD, and complete exercises in and out of session the help reduce your PTSD symptoms.

Q: Does PE work with multiple traumas?

A: Yes. Individuals with many different types of trauma have often experienced positive results with PE. Types of traumas include events related to combat, sexual assault, childhood abuse, natural disasters, and accidents.

Q: Will I be able to handle doing PE?

A: Many people worry that talking about their traumas may make things worse. Actually, research shows that this is not the case and that PE is very safe. Talk to your therapist if you have these concerns.

Q: Who can benefit from PE?

A: PE is most effective when you are committed and motivated to engage with all aspects of the treatment. This commitment involves attending all sessions, working with your therapist to follow a structured plan, and completing all assignments.

Q: Can I participate if I am recovering from a

A: Yes. Many people who have a history of problem drinking or drug use can participate as long as the substance use has been stabilized. If an individual has an co-occurring substance use disorder, it is recommended that they received treatment, while engaging in PE for PTSD.

Who We Are

The Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences' Center for Deployment Psychology (CDP) trains military and civilian behavioral health professionals to provide high quality, culturally-sensitive, evidence-based behavioral health services to Service members, Veterans and their families.

This brochure was adapted (with permission) from a Department of Veterans Affairs brochure on PE.



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Prolonged Exposure Therapy

What is Prolonged Exposure Therapy?

Prolonged Exposure (PE) Therapy is one of the therapies recommended by the Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PE is a type of cognitive-behavioral treatment that requires approximately 8-15 individual sessions. The exact number of sessions will be determined with your therapist. Sessions are typically 90 minutes in length.

PE addresses symptoms by decreasing avoidance, one of the underlying causes of PTSD. PE allows you to work through painful memories in a safe and supportive environment. It also allows you to engage with activities you have been avoiding because of the trauma.

In PE, the process of addressing the trauma is called “imaginal” exposure. During this part of the session, the therapist works with you to change thoughts and feelings surrounding your trauma.

The process of engaging with real life situations is called “in vivo” exposure. You and your therapist work together to identify activities that you have been avoiding due to the trauma.

The goal of both in vivo and imaginal exposure is to help you return to activities that you used to enjoy. This process helps to improve your quality of life.



PE is a short-term psychotherapy for treating symptoms of PTSD, which may include:

- Reliving or re-experiencing the event through distressing thoughts, nightmares, and flashbacks
- Avoiding thoughts and reminders of the event
- Negative changes in beliefs and feelings, such as anger and irritability
- Feeling keyed up, which may lead to problems sleeping and concentrating as well as being easily startled

What are the Goals of PE?

One of the primary goals of PE is to decrease your symptoms of PTSD and help you get back to how things were before the trauma(s). PE will help improve your understanding of PTSD and will allow you to process the traumatic event on an emotional and cognitive level. Additionally, PE will help you stop avoiding the people, places and/or things that remind you of the traumatic event and will help improve your day-to-day living.

What Will I Be Doing in PE?

- Throughout treatment, you will learn about PTSD including its causes, symptoms, and the reasons you continue to have symptoms.
- You will learn breathing exercises to help you relax.
- Beginning in the second and third sessions, you will start practicing in vivo (“in real life”) and imaginal exercises, both of which will help reduce trauma-related symptoms.
- You will be asked to complete regular out-of-session practice assignments.

Through these steps and exercises, you will begin the process of recovery and help to improve the quality of your life.