

PE: Prolonged Exposure

Trauma and its Effects

Having traumatic experiences is very common. Most people will have at least one traumatic experience during their lifetime; many will have more. Everyone is affected by traumatic experiences; but the effects differ. There are differences in how severe, how long-lasting and how much the impact affects everyday life. When the distress is very intense or goes on too long, treatment that directly addresses the trauma can be very helpful.

What is PE?

PE focuses on reducing the intense negative emotions that are caused by memories or being reminded of the trauma. The main negative emotions usually associated with remembering are fear and shame. The idea is that facing up to the memory in a planned way eventually wears down the negative emotions connected to the memory so that remembering or being reminded is not so upsetting. When the memory or reminders are not so upsetting, the person does not have to avoid them and can have a more normal life.

How does PE work?

- 1) *Breathing retraining.* Learning to do calming breathing when memories are upsetting
- 2) *Imaginal re-experiencing.* Repeatedly telling the story about what happened in the first person and including thoughts and feelings. The idea is to relive the experience in a safe place over and over again until it is not so upsetting to remember. Over time the negative emotions tend to wear down. It is often helpful to make a tape of the reliving and listen to it in between sessions
- 3) *In vivo.* This means identifying situations that are reminders of the trauma and facing up to them in real life in a planned and safe way until the connection to negative memories wears down. This helps to overcome avoidance of trauma reminders, incorrectly perceived dangerous situations, and activities that are important or used to be enjoyable.

PE can seem very scary at first. People avoid remembering or being reminded because it is upsetting so deciding to remember or be reminded on purpose means that in the beginning it will be hard. However, over time it really works.

How long does PE take?

PE often gets results in a few months. Sometimes treatment can be shorter, sometimes longer depending on the individual and their presenting symptoms.