

# Treating Traumatic Loss Related PTSD in Military Service Members and Veterans

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UT Health San Antonio and the STRONG STAR Consortium present

## THE STRONG STAR TRAINING INITIATIVE

The STRONG STAR Training Initiative conducts Learning Communities—competency-based training—in evidence-based treatments for *PTSD*, including **Cognitive Processing Therapy** and **Prolonged Exposure, Suicide Prevention, and Insomnia and Nightmares** with mental health providers.

Learn More: <https://www.strongstartraining.org>

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## Conflict of Interest Disclosure

The presenters have no conflicts of interests to disclose.

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## Overview

- Defining Traumatic Loss
- Traumatic Loss in the Military
- Assessing for Traumatic Loss
  - Persistent Complex Bereavement vs. PTSD
- Using CPT or PE to treat traumatic loss related PTSD

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## Traumatic Loss

- Witnessed or learned about the death of a family member, friend, or unit member (Stein et al., 2012)
- Examples:
  - Witness friend shot by sniper fire
  - Witness friend killed by IED explosion on convoy
  - Learned of friend or family member suicide
  - Witness or learn of death of friend from training accident
  - Witness or learn about death of friend via friendly fire

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### Traumatic Loss in the Military

- Witnessed or learned about the unexpected death of a family member, friend, or unit member (Stein et al., 2012):
  - 30%
- Witnessed a friend being shot or hit by IED during combat (Hoge et al., 2004):
  - Iraq: 22-26%
- Knew someone killed or seriously injured during combat (Hoge et al., 2004; Toblin et al., 2012):
  - Iraq: 86-87%, Afghanistan: 43%

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### Military Culture and Traumatic Loss

- High danger environment coupled with highly interdependent nature of military deployments
- Losing a service member from same unit can feel similar to losing a close family member
- "Battle Buddies" make promises to protect each other
  - "Never leave a man behind"
  - "Do your job and everyone will come home"
- Losing a loved-one while deployed (cannot provide support or say goodbye) can be traumatic

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### Assessing for Traumatic Loss and Persistent Complex Bereavement

- Trauma vs. PTSD
  - Traumatic Events are *events*
  - Posttraumatic Stress disorder is a *disorder*
  - ❖ Most people experience traumatic events, but most people do not develop PTSD
- Traumatic loss vs. Persistent complex bereavement disorder
  - Traumatic Loss is an *event*
  - Persistent complex bereavement is a *disorder*
  - ❖ Traumatic loss in the military is common, but not all people with traumatic loss experience persistent complex bereavement

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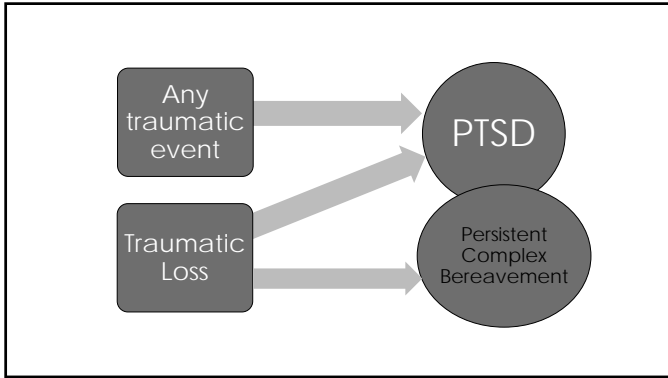
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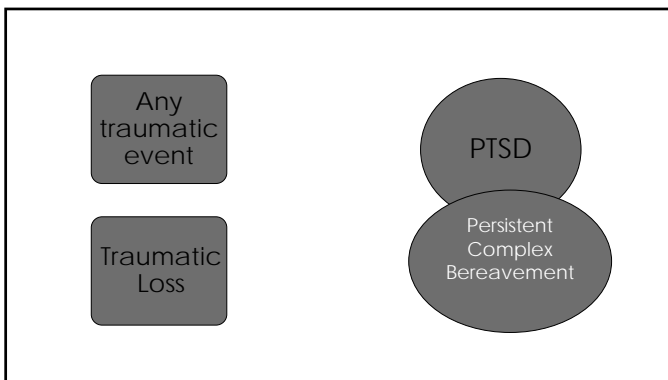
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**PTSD vs. Persistent Complex Bereavement**

- PTSD
  - Reexperiencing a *specific event*
  - Hypervigilance/Hyperarousal
  - Changes in mood and cognition
  - Avoidance of internal and external reminders of a *specific event*
- Persistent Complex Bereavement
  - Intense feelings of loneliness
  - Yearning for, urge to join, and preoccupation with deceased person
  - Disbelief/Non-Acceptance
  - Experiencing pain that deceased experienced
  - Intense reactions and either 1. avoidance of reminders of the *deceased person OR*  
2. seeking out reminders to feel close to the deceased person
- Overlapping symptoms
  - Numbness
  - Anger about the death
  - Difficulty trusting or connecting to others
  - Intense reactions and avoid memories of the *death*

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### Grief vs. Persistent Complex Bereavement

- Normal Grief
  - Although painful, grieving is an important, helpful, and healthy human reaction to a loss
  - Pain fluctuates - generally reduces in frequency and intensity over time
- Persistent Complex Bereavement
  - An unhelpful reaction causing significant dysfunction
  - Pain is continuous and may worsen over time

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### Assessing for Traumatic Loss and Persistent Complex Bereavement

- During the Trauma Focused Psychosocial Interview
  - "Give me a summary of what happened"
  - "Did you know anyone that was seriously harmed or killed during this event?"
  - "Tell me about your relationship with this person"
- Assessment Instruments
  - Persistent Complex Bereavement Inventory (Lee, 2015)
  - Traumatic Grief Inventory Self-Report (Boelen & Smid 2017)

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### General considerations when working with traumatic loss

- Make sure the client has PTSD
  - Do not pathologize normal grief
- Grief focused therapy best match for someone with persistent complex bereavement but no PTSD
- Comorbid complex bereavement and PTSD is okay

Any traumatic event

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Traumatic Loss

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PTSD

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Persistent Complex Bereavement

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### Conceptualization of clients traumatic loss-related PTSD

**What is keeping those with PTSD from traumatic loss “stuck” in the recovery process?”**

- Difficulty accepting their loved one is “really gone”
- Difficulty accepting finite nature of human life and relationships
- Difficulty tolerating or accepting natural grief related emotions, such as sadness and loneliness
  - In military populations, often presents as chronic anger

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### Overcoming common traumatic loss-related therapist barriers

- You can successfully conduct either CPT or PE even if the event was not directly witnessed
- You can use imaginal exposure or challenge stuck points on more than just “the event”
  - Learning about the death
  - Funeral/Role Call
  - Telling family members
- Don't be discouraged if there is an increase in sadness throughout treatment. For some, treatment begins the grief process.



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## Goals when working with traumatic loss

- Tolerance of remembering the death, and the natural healthy emotions associated with it*
- Acceptance of the reality of the death
- Advancing focus beyond the moments of death to the way they lived their life
- Loss Focus to Restoration Focus

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## What to listen for

Beliefs that perpetuate anger:

- Unfairness
  - They shouldn't have died because...
  - It should have been me instead because...
- Power and Control
  - I didn't keep my promise to "have their back"
  - Leadership should have protected him/her

**These function to avoid natural and healthy sadness by using anger, which maintains PTSD**

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## What to listen for

Fear and avoidance of experiencing sadness and grief

- Emotional/Distress Tolerance
  - If I feel sad, I am:
    - a weak person
    - a bad soldier
  - If I allow myself to feel sad/cry
    - I will be depressed forever
    - I'll go crazy
    - Become unable to function



**This avoidance inhibits processing, which maintains PTSD**

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### What to listen for

Fear and avoidance of experiencing positive emotions

- Intimacy Themes
  - There is no point in getting close to people because you will lose them
  - If I get close to others, I will let them down like I let my friend down
- Hopelessness Themes
  - The family's lives are ruined forever
  - Life is fragile and so there is no point to living
- Recovery Themes
  - See upcoming slides

**This avoidance inhibits processing, which maintains PTSD and depression**

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### When clients stay stuck

Explore with the client what it might mean to your client to recover from PTSD

- If I recover from PTSD, I am no longer honoring my friend
- I shouldn't do things I enjoy because my friend no longer can
- If I no longer have reexperiencing symptoms, I will forget about my friend
- If I no longer feel guilty, I am betraying my friend



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### Strategies when working with traumatic loss

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Questions to explore:

- What would the deceased person say to you now? What would they want for you?
- How can you honor the deceased person? How would they want to be honored?
- How would you want to be remembered?
- Thoughts on the afterlife and God (theirs and loved ones)
- What do you think it would mean if someone felt absolutely no sadness about the death of someone close to them?
- If you choose to not experience joy, who benefits?

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### Strategies when working with traumatic loss

#### Provide Psychoeducation

- Identify and normalize natural grief-related emotions
- Discuss differences between sadness/grief and depression
- Remind your patient that the ultimate goal of therapy is not to feel only positive emotions
- Discuss how avoidance of grief/sadness functions to maintain PTSD

*"Joy and pain are two sides of the same coin"*

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### Strategies when working with traumatic loss

#### Behavioral Experiments

- Explore ways that the client can honor their lost loved one
  - Doing things they liked to do, visiting their grave site, exhibiting a good quality that they possessed
- Practice approaching positive reminders of their loved one
  - Talking with others about positive memories of them
- Practicing behaviors that build on intimate relationships
  - Spending time, showing affection for loved ones
- Writing a letter or an imagined conversation with deceased person.

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### Summary

- The nature of military life and deployments make traumatic loss a common experience for military service members
- Most people with traumatic loss will not develop persistent complex bereavement or PTSD
  - May develop PTSD only, PCB only, or both
- Natural emotions associated with grief are normal, healthy, and important to experience and process
  - Not everyone grieves in the same way
  - PTSD can inhibit the natural grief process
- PE and CPT can be used effectively to help someone recover from PTSD and comorbid PCB associated with traumatic loss

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Questions?

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