**What is Prolonged Exposure Therapy?**

Prolonged Exposure (PE) therapy is a cognitive-behavioral treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The name Prolonged Exposure reflects the fact that the treatment program emerged from the long tradition of exposure therapy for anxiety disorders in which clients are helped to confront safe but anxiety-evoking situations in order to overcome their excessive fear and anxiety. In addition, PE is based on the emotional processing theory of PTSD, which emphasizes the importance of successfully processing the traumatic memory in order to diminish PTSD and other trauma-related symptoms (e.g., depression). To date, variants of exposure therapy including PE have received the most empirical evidence for their effectiveness in treating PTSD and have been designated by expert consensus as a first-line treatment for PTSD. The strong effectiveness of exposure therapy has been demonstrated in a wide range of trauma populations.

**The Role of Avoidance**

Avoidance is a major factor that maintains PTSD and prevents recovery. There are two ways that people avoid dealing with trauma reminders. The first is trying to push away memories, thoughts, and feelings about the trauma. The second is avoiding or avoiding situations, places, people, and objects that cause distress or fear because they are similar to the trauma or are reminders of the trauma. However, while the strategy of avoiding trauma-related thoughts and situations works in the short run, it actually prolongs the post-trauma reactions and prevents you from getting over your trauma-related difficulties.

**Stopping Avoidance**

Because avoiding thoughts about the trauma and situations that remind you of the trauma maintains your PTSD, exposure therapy helps you stop avoidance and instead encourages you to confront trauma-related thoughts and situations. PE includes two types of exposures: imaginal exposure and in vivo exposure.

**Imaginal Exposure**

Imaginal exposure involves asking you to visit the traumatic experience in your imagination and describe the trauma out loud. Imaginal exposure aims to enhance your ability to process the traumatic memory by asking you to describe the memory repeatedly during therapy sessions. Repeated and prolonged imaginal exposure to the traumatic memory is very effective in reducing trauma-related symptoms and helping you get new perspective and meaning about what happened before, during, and after the traumatic event.

**In vivo Exposure**

In vivo exposure means confronting situations you avoid “in real life.” You will be asked to gradually approach situations that you have been avoiding because they remind you of the trauma, directly or indirectly (e.g., driving a car, walking alone in a safe place). In vivo exposure has been found to be very effective in reducing excessive fears and avoidance after a trauma. For example, if you avoid trauma-related situations that are objectively safe, you do not give yourself the opportunity to get over your fear of these situations. This is because until you confront these situations, you may continue to believe they are dangerous, or that you will not be able to handle them. However, if you confront these situations in a gradual, systematic way, you will find out that they are not actually dangerous, that you can handle them, and that your anxiety will eventually diminish.

**Who is appropriate for PE?**

- Individuals with PTSD who clearly remember at least some part of the traumatic event(s).
- Individuals who do not exhibit any of the following:
  - Imminent risk of suicidal behavior
  - Recent suicidal or non-suicidal self-injury
  - Other severe problems that are a higher-priority target than PTSD and/or may interfere with emotional processing during exposure
  - Inability or unwillingness to experience intense emotions

**What’s typically involved**

PE typically consists of 10-15 weekly or twice-weekly individual therapy sessions that are 60-90 minutes each. PE has also been provided in brief, intensive formats (e.g., 5-10 day treatment programs).

**Individual PE therapy sessions**

Individual PE therapy sessions consist of:

- Assessment of trauma history and selection of specific trauma memories to be targeted via imaginal exposure.
- Development of a hierarchy of avoided situations for in vivo exposure, ranging from least to most anxiety-provoking.
- Imaginal exposure to one or more trauma memories.
- Post-exposure processing of thoughts and feelings.
- Assignment and review of in vivo and imaginal exposure homework exercises.

**References**

**Resources**

Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety at the University of Pennsylvania:
http://www.med.upenn.edu/ctsa/index.html

National Registry of Evidence-Based Programs and Practices:

American Psychological Association, Division 12, Website on Research-Supported Psychological Treatments:
http://www.div12.org/PsychologicalTreatments/treatments/ptsd_exposure.html

The International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies:
http://www.istss.org/

National Center for PTSD: http://www ptsd.va.gov/