

# Treating Complex Psychological Trauma

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## Complex trauma: What is it?

- Onset (usually involves or includes childhood trauma)
  - Attachment disruption
  - Implicit memories
- Relational
- Frequency and duration (prolonged, usually extends to adulthood)
- Complexity
  - Multiple victimization modalities
  - Interacting effects

## Complex trauma outcomes

- Anxiety and depression
- Chronic Posttraumatic stress
  - Intrusion
  - Effortful avoidance and numbing
  - Hyperarousal
- “Borderline” symptomatology
  - Affect dysregulation
  - Identity disturbance
  - Relational disturbance

## Complex trauma outcomes

- Avoidance activities
  - Denial, thought suppression
  - Tension reduction activities
    - Self-mutilation
    - Compulsive sexual behavior
    - Bulimic behavior
  - Substance abuse
  - Dissociation
  - Suicidality

## **Insecure attachment-related schemata**

- Implicit, nonverbal schema
- "Hooked" to emotional-cognitive memories
- "Out of proportion" affect as triggered early schema and associated gestalts
- Source attribution errors
- Impulsivity: Tension-reduction to address overwhelming affect

## **Introduction to the Self-Trauma Model**

- Integrated approach to complex posttraumatic outcomes
  - Cognitive-behavioral and relational
- Takes comorbidity into account
- Titrated exposure to traumatic material

## **Importance of the therapeutic relationship**

- Attendance, compliance
- Context for support, validation, safety
- Activates relational schema, which can then be addressed
- Counterconditions relational trauma memories

# The therapeutic window

- Titrated exposure
  - Balance between therapeutic challenge and overwhelming internal experience
  - Limiting factors
    - CER intensity
    - Affect regulation skills
- Overshooting vs. undershooting the window

## Central components of trauma processing

- Repetitive exposure to trauma memories via questions/facilitation of disclosure via the therapeutic window
- Trauma processing
  - Exposure
  - Activation
  - Disparity
  - Counterconditioning
  - Extinction/resolution

## Cognitive interventions

- Normalization and reframing
- Cognitive "reconsideration" of trauma-specific beliefs and assumptions
- Development of a coherent narrative

## **Affect regulation training and identity development**

- Affect regulation
  - Emotion identification
  - Interfering in catastrophizing cognitions
  - Repetitive exposure and de-escalation as affect regulation training
- Identity development
  - Development of self-knowledge and self-directedness
  - Value of non-leading, open-ended questions
  - Avoiding the over-use of interpretations

## **Collaboration with other behavioral health specialists**

- Social casework
  - Safety, housing, systems advocacy
- Psychological testing
  - General/comorbid symptoms/disorders
  - Specific trauma symptoms/disorders
- Medication
  - Comorbid anxiety, depression, psychosis
  - Specific trauma symptoms/disorders
- Hospitalization