

# Treatment of Complex PTSD: Results from the ISTSS Expert Consensus Study on Best Practices

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*This study provides a summary of the results of an expert opinion survey initiated by the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies Complex Trauma Task Force regarding best practices for the treatment of complex posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Ratings from a mail-in survey from 25 complex PTSD experts and 25 classic PTSD experts regarding the most appropriate treatment approaches and interventions for complex PTSD were examined for areas of consensus and disagreement. Experts agreed on several aspects of treatment, with 84% endorsing a phase-based or sequenced therapy as the most appropriate treatment approach with interventions tailored to specific symptom sets. First-line interventions matched to specific symptoms included emotion regulation strategies, narration of trauma memory, cognitive restructuring, anxiety and stress management, and interpersonal skills. Meditation and mindfulness interventions were frequently identified as an effective second-line approach for emotional, attentional, and behavioral (e.g., aggression) disturbances. Agreement was not obtained on either the expected course of improvement or on duration of treatment. The survey results provide a strong rationale for conducting research focusing on the relative merits of traditional trauma-focused therapies and sequenced multicomponent approaches applied to different patient populations with a range of symptom profiles. Sustained symptom monitoring during the course of treatment and during extended follow-up would advance knowledge about both the speed and durability of treatment effects.*

Keywords: complex PTSD, expert consensus, best practices, treatment, PTSD

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complex PTSD (Keane, 2000). A body of research has demonstrated that complex PTSD is a distinct clinical entity characterized by a range of symptoms, including re-experiencing, avoidance, and hyperarousal (Pech, Van Der Kolk, Runtz, Mader, Kessler, & Resick, 1997). A recent review of DSM-IV criteria for PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) noted that the current criteria for PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) do not adequately capture the full range of symptoms associated with complex PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The current criteria for PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) do not adequately capture the full range of symptoms associated with complex PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The current criteria for PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 1994) do not adequately capture the full range of symptoms associated with complex PTSD (American Psychiatric Association, 1994).

American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 2000, 70, 465). The prevalence of PTSD in combat veterans is estimated to be 15% to 20% (Foa et al., 1999). The prevalence of PTSD in civilian populations is estimated to be 8% to 15% (Foa et al., 1999). The prevalence of PTSD in children and adolescents is estimated to be 1% to 5% (Foa et al., 1999).

According to the DSM-IV-TR (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), PTSD is characterized by the presence of one or more of the following symptoms: (a) re-experiencing the traumatic event, (b) avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma, (c) negative alterations in mood and cognition, and (d) increased arousal. The symptoms must be present for more than one month and cause significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

In addition to the DSM-IV-TR criteria, the ICD-10 (World Health Organization, 1992) defines PTSD as a condition characterized by the presence of one or more of the following symptoms: (a) re-experiencing the traumatic event, (b) avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma, (c) negative alterations in mood and cognition, and (d) increased arousal. The symptoms must be present for more than one month and cause significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.

Research has shown that PTSD is associated with a variety of physical and psychological health problems. For example, individuals with PTSD are more likely to experience depression, anxiety, and substance use disorders. Additionally, PTSD is associated with increased risk of cardiovascular disease, chronic pain, and other medical conditions. The prevalence of PTSD in the general population is estimated to be 8% to 15% (Foa et al., 1999).

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Approach	95% Confidence interval									Experts' ratings (%)			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
	3 <sup>rd</sup> line			2 <sup>nd</sup> line			1 <sup>st</sup> line			1 <sup>st</sup> line	2 <sup>nd</sup> line	3 <sup>rd</sup> line		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9					
Sequenced treatment										8.0	1.6	85	15	0
Primarily coping skills										5.3	2.2	34	40	26
Combine processing and skills										4.3	2.4	27	23	50
Primarily memory processing										4.7	1.2	29	47	24



	95% Confidence interval									Experts' ratings (%)					
	3 <sup>rd</sup> line			2 <sup>nd</sup> line			1 <sup>st</sup> line			<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1 <sup>st</sup> line	2 <sup>nd</sup> line	3 <sup>rd</sup> line	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9						
Acceptability															
Education about trauma										8.0	1.4	86	14	0	



Treatment of First-Episode and Second-Episode Traumatic Stressor

Mental Disorder	First-Episode	Second-Episode
Recurrent	Education about trauma Narrative format	Cognitive restructuring Exposure therapy Adequate aftercare
Acute/chronic	Education about trauma Exposure therapy	Cognitive restructuring Narrative format Medication/meditation Lifestyle adjustments
Hereditary	Education about trauma Exposure therapy Adequate aftercare	Narrative format Cognitive restructuring
Affected area	Education about trauma Exposure therapy	(abuse)-250.4(-)-0.2(a)]TJ16.8001 -1.1997 TD-

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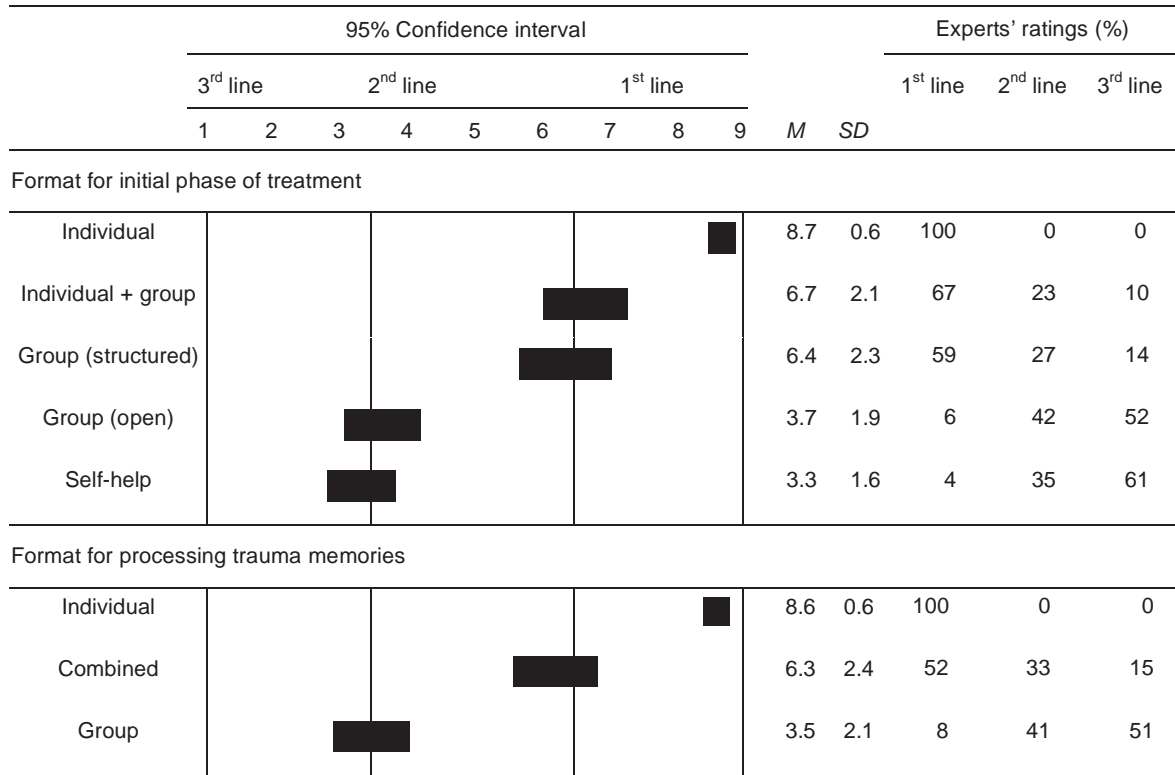


Figure 5. Ratings for effectiveness of different treatment formats.

are more effective than self-help (Carmichael, 2009), and group (structured) is more effective than individual (Carmichael, 2009).

The results of the present study are consistent with the findings of the meta-analysis (Carmichael, 2009), which found that group (structured) is more effective than individual (Carmichael, 2009), and group (open) is more effective than individual (Carmichael, 2009). The results of the present study are also consistent with the findings of the meta-analysis (Carmichael, 2009), which found that group (structured) is more effective than individual (Carmichael, 2009), and group (open) is more effective than individual (Carmichael, 2009).

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Ratings for effectiveness of different treatment formats are shown in Figure 5. The results of the present study are consistent with the findings of the meta-analysis (Carmichael, 2009), which found that group (structured) is more effective than individual (Carmichael, 2009), and group (open) is more effective than individual (Carmichael, 2009).





