

# SUPPORTING PEOPLE WHO ARE EXPERIENCING SYMPTOMS OF COMPLEX PTSD



INFORMATION FOR FRIENDS, FAMILY AND PARTNERS

By Bedfordshire community organisation – Recovery Code X

*Survivor led  
For the people  
By the people*



**YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED** that your friend, partner or family member is exhibiting certain behaviours or symptoms. The following can be part of Complex PTSD.

- They may have feelings of shame or guilt
- They can have difficulty controlling their emotions
- They have periods of losing attention and concentration (dissociation)
- They cut themselves off from friends and family
- They have relationship difficulties
- They have destructive or risky behaviour (self-harm, alcohol misuse or drug abuse)
- They can have suicidal thoughts



## The War Within

Complex PTSD is a normal response to prolonged, repeated interpersonal trauma or abuse and neglect in childhood that is experienced as life-threatening or horrific from which escape is difficult or impossible.

Judith Herman (1992) noticed that sufferers had a 'spectrum of conditions' in common that 'disorganise the personality'. The symptoms are more complex than those seen in survivors of a single event or short-lived traumatic events - PTSD

Other causes of Complex PTSD are domestic violence, being a victim of human trafficking, combat, living in a war zone, being a prisoner of war, slavery and torture.

## You can make a difference

If you have serious concerns for your friend or loved-one's welfare, talk to them and suggest they contact their GP.

Learn these five trauma-informed principles by Fallot and Harris ([people.nhs.uk](http://people.nhs.uk)) to help avoid 'triggering' or upsetting them, maintain stability in your relationship and support them in their recovery.

Recovery Code X suggests the following Do's and Don'ts.

### 1. Safety

People suffering from Complex PTSD find relationships challenging because they can be triggered to past overwhelming events. They can expect betrayal and abandonment by those closest to them. It can be difficult for them to relax if the environment makes them feel unsafe.

#### Do

- Be aware of how the person reacts when you initiate communication. Is it a good time?
- Explain that you're interested in supporting them and it would help you to understand more about what they are experiencing.
- Check whether they feel safe and comfortable in the location.
- Ask whether they feel calm enough to talk.
- Ask them if they know what their triggers are, so that you can understand them. Is there something you can do or say to comfort them when they are triggered?

#### Don't

- Tell them they are being oversensitive or say 'just forget about it'.
- Minimise or deny how they are feeling.
- Make assumptions about how they feel or what they are thinking, or that their silence means they feel OK or safe. They may be overwhelmed, dissociated, or unable to speak.



## 2. Building Trust

Some survivors can't imagine ever trusting anyone again. Others crave close friendships and intimacy but feel people are too dangerous, so can sabotage or avoid developing relationships.

### Do

- Respect what they share with you and give verbal and non-verbal indications that you have listened and accept them.
- Be aware of your non-verbal communication, use a gentle manner and tone, listen to them with empathy. Sometimes paraphrasing helps to show you understand.
- Support their self-care efforts.
- Show an interest in them and their life.

### Don't

- Make any assumptions about the meaning of their story – memories of trauma can be scrambled and fragmented.
- Ask lots of questions and offer cold, 'logical' explanations when they open up to you. This could come across as disbelief, criticism or denial and trigger old feelings of shame and abandonment. It could also generate a flashback or panic attack.
- Question or judge their actions in relation to the abuse – they did the best they could at the time.

## 3. Collaboration

People who have suffered relational abuse recover when they are able to connect with other human beings and feel accepted for who they are. When they can express their needs without fear of coercion or manipulation, healing can take place.

You will build more trust if you collaborate with them rather than try to control them.

### Do

- Participate in doing things 'with' them rather than 'for' or 'to' them.
- Allow them to be in control of decision-making concerning their recovery. Only intervene if they might be at risk of hurting themselves or hurting others. (This is a legal requirement as otherwise you will be held responsible.)
- Stay and support them. Allow them to be tearful with grief or anger, help them express themselves in healthy ways. It's OK to cry.
- Validate their emotions.

### Don't

- Assume they can't make positive informed decisions for themselves.
- Coerce them into doing something against their will.
- Try to get them to talk when they are overwhelmed with emotion.

## 4. Choice

They may have learnt to disregard their needs in favour of the abuser's to preserve their safety and survival. Regaining personal autonomy is key to recovery.

### Do

- Let them choose their path of recovery
- Let them share with whom they want, when they want.
- Let them decide what they want to share, when and where they talk to you about their trauma.
- Share information on recovery therapies.

### If you are their partner

- Reassure them that they don't have to do anything they're not comfortable with.
- Allow them to be intimate at their own pace.
- Find out more about the effects of rape and sexual abuse (if applicable) and how you can best support them.

### Don't

- Push them into talking about something they're not ready to discuss.
- Impose your beliefs about the best treatment options for Complex PTSD.



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This factsheet has been created thanks to funding from the National Lottery Awards for All.

Listen to the podcast edition on our website: [www.recoverycodex.org/factsheets](http://www.recoverycodex.org/factsheets)



## 5. Empowerment

A sense of 'wholeness' and inner peace can take time when recovering from Complex PTSD, and how long this takes varies for each person. With stability and clarity come opportunities to choose who we want to be with and the life we want to lead.

### Don't

- Assume Complex PTSD is a life-sentence or they're too damaged to recover. Neuroscience shows the brain can repair itself after trauma.

### Do

- Encourage them to pursue social interests, whether these are online or face-to-face interactions.
- Support their sense of mission to help others who have been similarly victimised
- Support them if they wish to pursue justice against their abuser(s).
- Show them respect in your words and actions.
- Offer moral support, practical assistance and care.
- Help them access trauma-informed therapies.