

Sexual Healing

Understanding Sex & PTSD

By Sharna Striar, Ph.D., CST, CNS

For many of us, an intimate relationship can be challenging, but for those with PTSD it can often feel impossible. If you have experienced difficulty in your intimate relationships, sexual expression, or self-esteem, you are not alone. In fact, people diagnosed with PTSD have a higher risk of problems with intimacy than the general population.

The National Center of PTSD states that sexual problems experienced by victims of sexual assault and those with PTSD can leave the individual afraid of and avoidant of sexual activity. Experiencing an overall decrease in sexual interest and desire that results in a diminished sexual intimacy with your partner can leave you feeling ashamed, frightened, alone, and tormented by fear of losing love relationships.

In my role as a psychotherapist and certified sex therapist, I have treated a number of men and women with long-standing histories of traumatic events that lead to difficulty with sexual intimacy. These individuals have come into my office so distressed. Their presentation can include hypersexuality with random partners devoid of intimacy, addiction to masturbating to Internet porn, reporting phobic avoidance of touch and sexual activity with their partner, and even an overall numbness of sexual feelings. The stories are varied, but common in the trauma they induce. “My uncle touched my genitals”... “The foster boy in our home locked me in a closet and violated me; I was 7”... “I saw women and children maimed during my tour”... “My Mom pulled my pants down and whipped me repeatedly”... “I was date-raped at 15 and then ridiculed by my peers”... “My panic attacks from my near-death experience keep me in constant fear.”

What these stories share is the way that trauma shifts one’s view of intimacy. The traumatic experience acts as a veil that often produces intrusive negative thoughts and images, limiting an individual’s capacity to trust, connect, feel, and engage in a healthy sexual relationship.



The good news is that if you have experienced trauma or been diagnosed with PTSD, it’s possible to restore your human right to emotional and sexual pleasure in your relationship. The process requires time, patience, and expert guidance.

I often hear “How can I recover? I want to be normal.” First, seek counseling, with a psychotherapist credentialed in sex therapy, to work through the trauma in a safe environment. It is common for survivors of sexual trauma to grapple with feelings of guilt and shame. Counseling gently guides survivors to accept that the trauma was not their fault.

Second, step back into your body through a sexual retraining process of gradually learning to give and receive pleasure to help gain the capacity and desire for intimacy. People can be hesitant to embark on this process, but it is done slowly and at a pace appropriate for the individual.

This gentle non-threatening set of touching experiences is called “sensate focus exercises”. If the thought of beginning sensate focus is overwhelming to you, the touching assignment can be visualized at first, guided by the therapist, while managing any anxiety and/or negative thoughts that may arise.

When you are ready, the next step is often to progress to a touching exercise by yourself, focusing and exploring sensations and reclaiming your body. At this point, your partner is typically introduced as part of the therapy process, with the goal to reestablish rapport and mutual understanding. After that, you and your partner engage in progressive sensate focus exercises, focusing on sensations, and the “now.” These assignments may be frightening at first as you reconnect with your body, with sensual feelings, and to each other, but they are a path to reconditioning your mind and body to touch and pleasure.

Mindful breathing and cognitive reframing of catastrophic thoughts, along with thought-stopping techniques, facilitate this process. Reconnecting with bodily sensations can leave you feeling grounded, in control, and cared for and loved.

It is important to keep in mind an array of factors that may play a part in the treatment process that need to be considered. Relationship tensions, anxiety about sexual performance, attachment issues, depression, medical problems, and medications all influence this clinical process.

Healing is always a gradual process full of starts and stops. This is particularly the case for people with PTSD. Stay patient, connected, and most of all, stay positive and be good to yourself, building self-esteem and empowerment as you go. In my practice I have seen many patients who suffer with PTSD-related sexual concerns reconnect with their partners, sometimes in more intimate ways than before and have fulfilling sexually intimate lives together.