



Understanding Complex PTSD (C-PTSD)

Making sense of what feels confusing—and finding a way through

What is C-PTSD?

C-PTSD (Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) is a response to long-term, repeated trauma—often in settings where you couldn't leave, say no, or feel safe. It's not just about what happened, but how alone, powerless, or stuck you felt in it.

Common sources include childhood emotional neglect or abuse, domestic violence, religious or institutional harm, systemic oppression, and relationships where love was conditional or weaponized.

What C-PTSD can feel like:

- Like you're always waiting for the other shoe to drop
- Constant self-doubt or "am I the problem?" spirals
- Like your body doesn't feel like a safe place to be
- A mix of numbness, dread, and guilt that's hard to name
- Overwhelm or panic in situations that don't seem "that bad" to others
- Feeling broken but not knowing how to explain it

What it can look like:

- Perfectionism, overfunctioning, or chronic people-pleasing

- Freezing up in conflict, even minor disagreements
- Emotional shutdowns or lashing out when triggered
- Struggling to trust or open up, even with people you care about
- Checking out (dissociating) without realizing it
- A deep sense of shame or self-criticism that colors everything

How it shows up in relationships:

- Getting close feels unsafe, but being alone feels unbearable
- Apologizing constantly or trying to "earn" your place in someone's life
- Fear of being abandoned, replaced, or misunderstood
- Avoiding intimacy, or going all-in too fast, then regretting it
- Getting triggered by someone else's disappointment or withdrawal
- Feeling like you're too much, or like your needs are a burden

Why it's hard to recognize:

C-PTSD doesn't always have a single event to point to. It often builds slowly—especially if trauma was your “normal.” Many people with C-PTSD go years without realizing their anxiety, relationship patterns, or emotional struggles are trauma-related. Instead, they may be misdiagnosed with anxiety, depression, or a personality disorder. That can be confusing and disorienting, especially if no one ever named what actually happened to you.

There is Hope—and There Are Tools.

Healing from C-PTSD is absolutely possible. It's not fast or linear, but it *is* real. And it doesn't mean becoming a “different” person—it means reconnecting with the parts of you that had to go underground to survive.

Here are concrete ways to begin that process:

Nervous system support:

C-PTSD lives in the body, not just the mind. Finding ways to calm and regulate your nervous system is foundational.

- Learn to recognize when you're in [fight, flight, freeze, or fawn](#)
- Use grounding tools (weighted blankets, cold water, movement, scent, music)
- Gentle body-based practices like somatic therapy, yoga therapy, or trauma-informed massage can help reconnect you to your body safely
- Apps like *Insight Timer*, *Mindful Mamas*, or *Curable* (especially for chronic pain or health anxiety) can offer daily support

Consider starting with books like:

- *The Complex PTSD Workbook* by Arielle Schwartz
- *What My Bones Know* by Stephanie Foo (memoir)
- *Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors* by Janina Fisher
- *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* by Lindsay Gibson

Relational healing:

Trauma is often relational—so healing can be too.

- Practice noticing how your nervous system responds to safety, not just danger
- Experiment with “safe enough” connections: a trusted friend, a support group, a pet, or even an online space where you feel seen
- Learn how to name your needs and boundaries without apology (it's okay to start small)
- Consider group therapy or support spaces for survivors—healing in community can be powerful

Self-compassion & internal reparenting:

- Begin to speak to yourself the way you wish someone had when you were young or hurting

- Keep a journal where you notice patterns and offer yourself warmth, not judgment
- Try voice memos to your younger self (yes, it can feel silly—but also very healing)
- Ask: What does the part of me that’s panicking or shutting down *need to hear right now*?
- [This blogpost](#) is filled with trauma-informed self-care techniques that meet you where you are

Daily practices that can help over time:

- Building structure and predictability into your week (C-PTSD craves safety cues)
- Limiting media that makes you feel unsafe, on edge, or dysregulated
- Keeping a “proof of safety” list or shoebox: notes from people you trust, reminders of times you were brave, photos where you felt real
- Allowing small joys: soft blankets, favorite snacks, time outdoors, music that brings you back to yourself

What this means for you:

If any of this sounds familiar, it doesn’t mean you’re too damaged to be helped. It means your body and mind did what they had to do. That deserves respect, not shame. Healing from C-PTSD isn’t about doing it perfectly—it’s about doing it *differently*, with more support, more tools, and more self-understanding.

You’re allowed to take your time. You’re allowed to need help. You’re allowed to hope.