Complex PTSD in one page

What it is

What is complex PTSD?

Complex PTSD is a form of PTSD that can follow trauma that went on for a long time or was hard to escape, such as abuse in childhood. It has every PTSD symptom, plus lasting trouble with emotions, self-worth and relationships.

The signs

What are the symptoms of complex PTSD?

Complex PTSD has the three core PTSD symptoms: reliving the trauma, avoiding reminders and feeling under threat. Added to them are strong emotions that are hard to calm, a deep sense of being worthless or defeated, and trouble feeling close to others.

How a diagnosis happens

How do plans and referrals work for two conditions?

You get one set of Better Access sessions, not one per condition: up to 10 individual and 10 group sessions in a calendar year. Your GP writes a mental health treatment plan and a referral listing your symptoms or diagnosis. The first referral is for up to six sessions. Then your GP reviews the plan and can refer you again.

Treatment

Does dissociation change the therapy order?

It can. Some complex PTSD therapy starts with a phase on safety and handling strong feelings, before work on trauma memories. Australia's trauma guideline says it is still unclear whether that first phase is always needed. People with dissociation are often left out of treatment studies, so your clinician will weigh the order with you.

Medication

Is medicine used for both?

Not as the main treatment. Australia's trauma guideline says no medicine has good evidence for treating complex PTSD, and healthdirect says no medicine treats dissociative identity disorder. Therapy comes first. A doctor may still suggest a medicine for other problems, like depression or anxiety, alongside therapy, often while you are starting out.

- Therapy is the main treatment

Who diagnoses and who prescribes

Can my GP prescribe, or do I need a psychiatrist?

Yes. A GP can prescribe the complex PTSD medicines this guide covers. They are Schedule 4, which means prescription only, so no special state permit is needed. The PBS rules do not say the prescriber must be a psychiatrist. MDMA is the exception. It follows different rules and is covered in its own article.

- A GP can prescribe these medicines

Who can prescribe, and on what conditions, differs by state and territory. See the pages on your state at haihealth.au/blog/complex-ptsd.

What it costs

What does it cost under Medicare?

It depends on who you see and what they charge. With a mental health treatment plan, Medicare pays part of up to 10 individual and 10 group therapy sessions in a calendar year. For a psychiatrist's assessment and plan, item 291, Medicare pays $467.45 of a $549.90 fee. Ask each practice what you will pay after Medicare.

- Medicare pays part, not all

In danger? Call 000. Lifeline 13 11 14, text 0477 13 11 14, or chat online.

Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467. Free counselling by phone or video, any hour.

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