National Center for PTSD
POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Understanding PTSD and PTSD Treatment

www.ptsd.va.gov | June 2016

Table of Contents

PTSD Basics

What is PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder)? 3
What can cause PTSD? 4
What are the symptoms of PTSD? 5
How do I know if I have PTSD? 7
What do I do if I have symptoms of PTSD? 8

PTSD Treatment

Why get treatment for PTSD? 9
Common questions about treatment 10
What happens during PTSD treatment? 11
Where can I go to get help? 14

Laurent G. Taillefer II, US Army (2003–2006)

Get help if you're in crisis

If you feel like you might hurt yourself or someone else:

- **Call 1-800-273-TALK** (1-800-273-8255) anytime to talk to a crisis counselor. The call is confidential (private) and free.
- **Chat online with a crisis counselor** anytime at http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/.

You can also **call 911** or **go to your local emergency room.**

What is PTSD?

PTSD (posttraumatic stress disorder) is a mental health problem that some people develop after experiencing or witnessing a life-threatening event, like combat, a natural disaster, a car accident, or sexual assault.

It's normal to have upsetting memories, feel on edge, or have trouble sleeping after this type of event. At first, it may be hard to do normal daily activities, like go to work, go to school, or spend time with people you care about. But most people start to feel better after a few weeks or months.

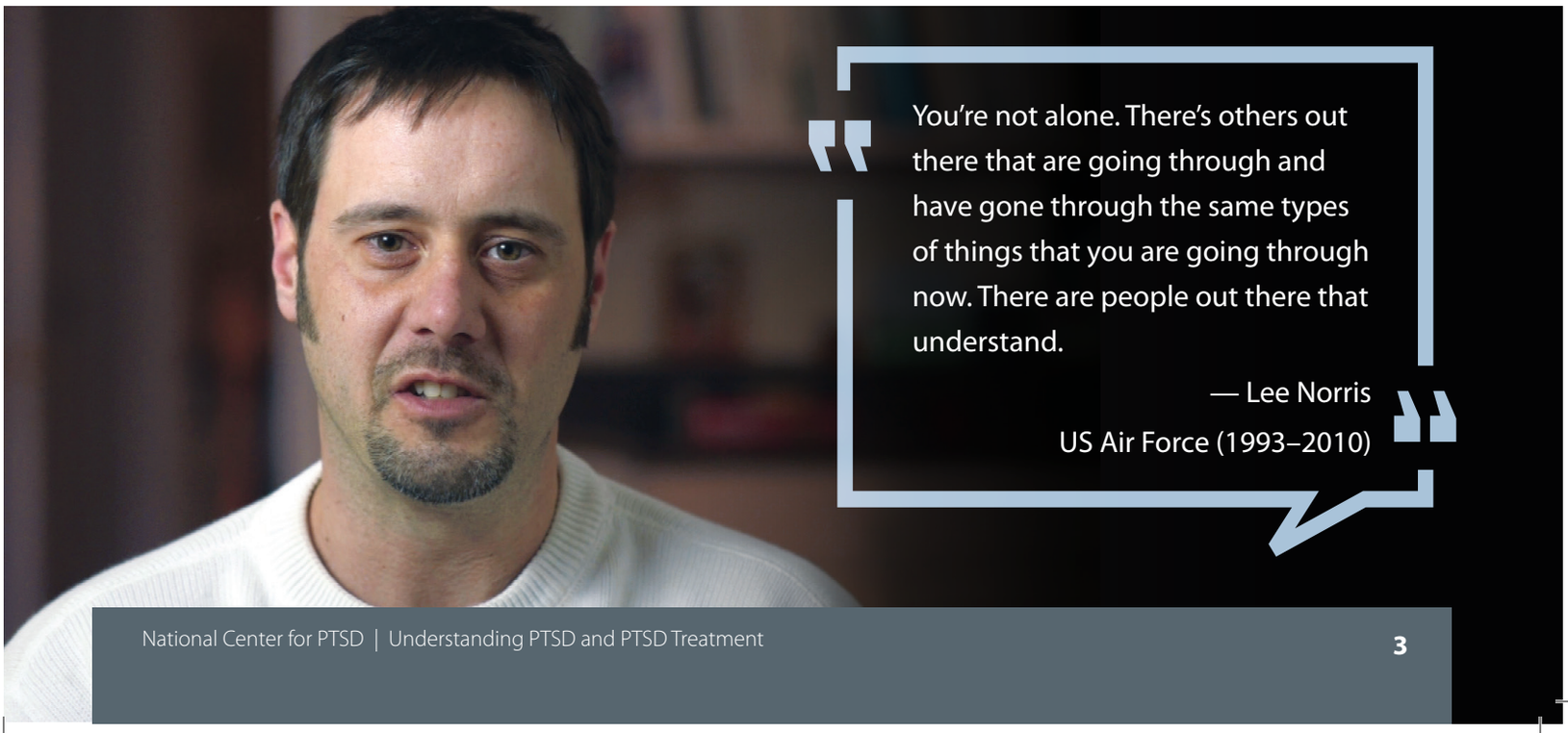
If it's been longer than a few months and you're still having symptoms, you may have PTSD. For some people, PTSD symptoms may start later on, or they may come and go over time.

If thoughts and feelings from a life-threatening event are upsetting you or causing problems in your life, **you may have PTSD.**

Here's the good news: you can get treatment for PTSD — and it works. In this booklet, you'll learn about types of treatment that are proven to help.

For some people, treatment can get rid of PTSD altogether. For others, it can make symptoms less intense. Treatment also gives you the tools to manage symptoms so they don't keep you from living your life.

PTSD treatment can turn your life around — even if you've been struggling for years.



What can cause PTSD?

Any experience that threatens your life or someone else's can cause PTSD. These types of events are sometimes called **trauma**. Types of traumatic events that can cause PTSD include:

- Combat and other military experiences
- Sexual or physical assault
- Learning about the violent or accidental death or injury of a loved one
- Child sexual or physical abuse
- Serious accidents, like a car wreck
- Natural disasters, like a fire, tornado, hurricane, flood, or earthquake
- Terrorist attacks

During this kind of event, you may not have any control over what's happening, and you may feel very afraid. Anyone who has gone through something like this can develop PTSD.

Trauma can take many forms.

A traumatic event could be something that happened to you, or something you saw happen to someone else. Seeing the effects of a horrible or violent event can also be traumatic — for example, being a first responder after a terrorist attack.

You're not alone.

Going through a traumatic event is not rare. At least half of Americans have had a traumatic event in their lives. Of people who have had trauma, about 1 in 10 men and 2 in 10 women will develop PTSD.

There are some things that make it more likely you'll develop PTSD — for example, having very intense or long-lasting trauma, getting hurt, or having a strong reaction to the event (like shaking, throwing up, or feeling distant from your surroundings).

It's also more common to develop PTSD after certain types of trauma, like combat and sexual assault. But there's no way to know for sure who will develop PTSD.

> "I was awarded a Silver Star for bravery. You're not going to tell me I'm a coward. If somebody like me has PTSD, then anybody can have it."
>
> — MAJ Joshua Brandon
> US Army (2002–present)

> Even just falling asleep was tough. The minute I would start dozing off I would get a surge of adrenaline or anxiety, and would wake up. And even when I did fall asleep, I would wake up with night terrors or sweats.
>
> — Stacy L. Pearsall
> US Air Force (1998–2008)

What are the symptoms of PTSD?

There are 4 types of PTSD symptoms, but they may not be exactly the same for everyone. Each person experiences symptoms in their own way.

1. Reliving the event

Unwelcome thoughts about the trauma can come up at any time. They can feel very real and scary, as if the event is happening again. This is called a flashback. You may also have nightmares.

Memories of the trauma can happen because of a trigger — something that reminds you of the event. For example, seeing a news report about a disaster may trigger someone who lived through a hurricane. Or hearing a car backfire might bring back memories of gunfire for a combat Veteran.

2. Avoiding things that remind you of the event

You may try to avoid certain people or situations that remind you of the event. For example, someone who was assaulted on the bus might avoid taking public transportation. Or a combat Veteran may avoid crowded places like shopping malls because it feels dangerous to be around so many people.

You may also try to stay busy all the time so you don't have to talk or think about the event.

3. Having more negative thoughts and feelings than before

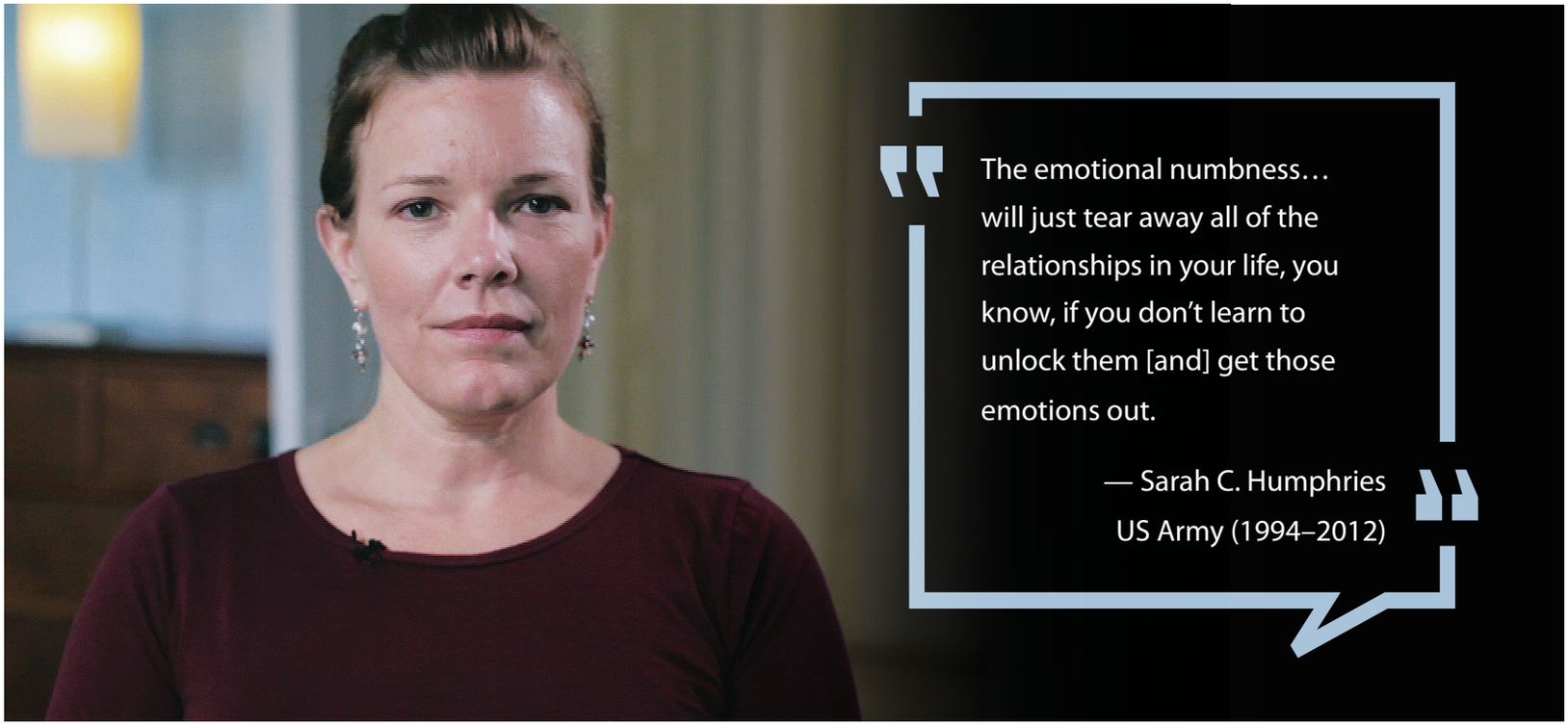
You may feel more negative than you did before the trauma. You might be sad or numb — and lose interest in things you used to enjoy, like spending time with friends. You may feel that the world is dangerous and you can't trust anyone. It may be hard for you to feel or express happiness, or other positive emotions.

You might also feel guilt or shame about the traumatic event itself. For example, you may wish you had done more to keep it from happening.

4. Feeling on edge

It's common to feel jittery or "keyed up" — like it's hard to relax. This is called hyperarousal. You might have trouble sleeping or concentrating, or feel like you're always on the lookout for danger. You may suddenly get angry and irritable — and if someone surprises you, you might startle easily.

You may also act in unhealthy ways, like smoking, abusing drugs and alcohol, or driving aggressively.



How do I know if I have PTSD?

The only way to know for sure is to talk to a mental health care provider. He will ask you about your trauma, your symptoms, and any other problems you have.

If you think you might have PTSD, answer the questions in the screening tool below.

PTSD Screen

Sometimes things happen to people that are unusually or especially frightening, horrible, or traumatic. For example, a serious accident or fire, a physical or sexual assault or abuse, an earthquake or flood, a war, seeing someone be killed or seriously injured, or having a loved one die through homicide or suicide.

Have you ever experienced this kind of event? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If yes, please answer the questions below. **In the past month, have you:**

- ☐ Had nightmares about the event(s) or thought about the event(s) when you didn't want to?
- ☐ Tried hard not to think about the event(s) or went out of your way to avoid situations that reminded you of the event(s)?
- ☐ Been constantly on guard, watchful, or easily startled?
- ☐ Felt numb or detached from people, activities, or your surroundings?
- ☐ Felt guilty or unable to stop blaming yourself or others for the event(s) or any problems the event(s) may have caused?

If you answered "yes" to 3 or more of these questions, talk to a mental health care provider to learn more about PTSD and PTSD treatment.

Answering "yes" to 3 or more questions does not mean you have PTSD. Only a mental health care provider can tell you for sure.

What if the screening tool says I don't have PTSD?

You may still want to talk to a mental health care provider. If thoughts and feelings from the trauma are bothering you, treatment can help — whether or not you have PTSD.

What do I do if I have symptoms of PTSD?

After a traumatic event, it's normal to think, act, and feel differently than usual — but most people start to feel better after a few weeks or months. **Talk to a doctor or mental health care provider** (like a psychiatrist, psychologist, or social worker) if your symptoms:

- Last longer than a few months
- Are very upsetting
- Disrupt your daily life

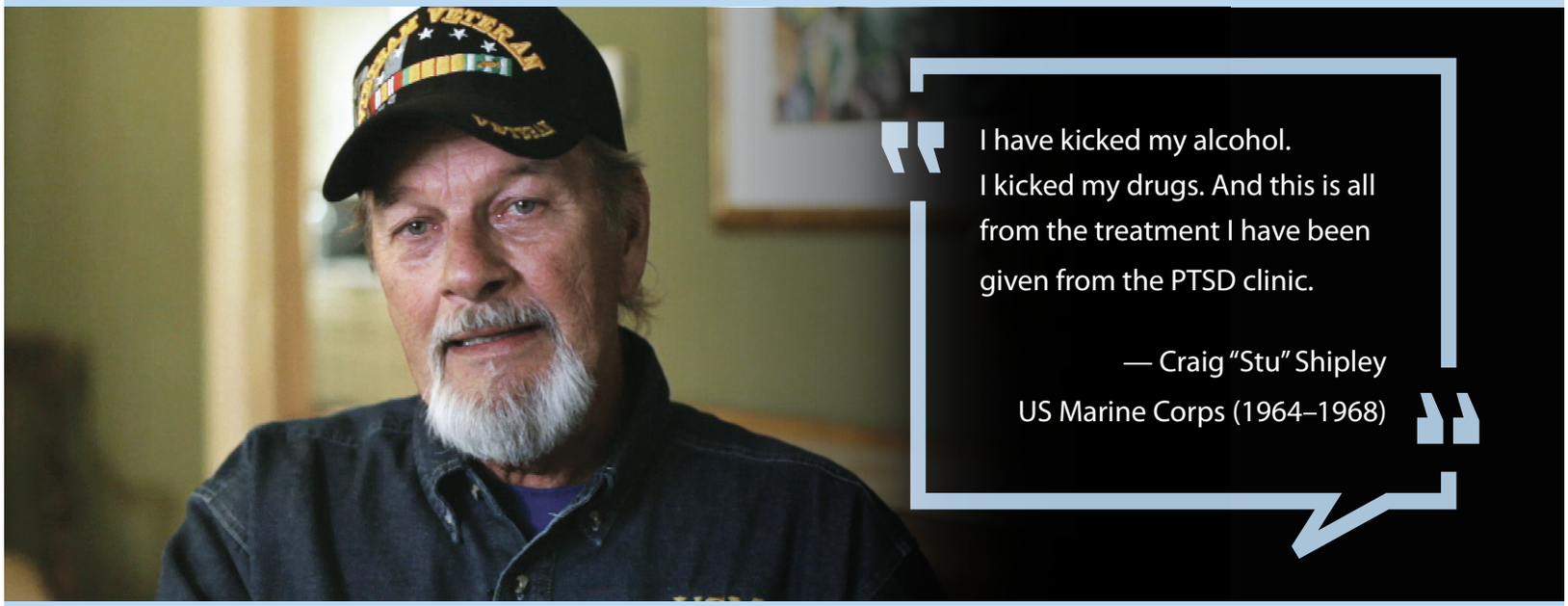
Treatment can help — you don't have to live with your symptoms forever.

What other problems do people with PTSD have?

Many people who have PTSD also have another mental health problem — like depression, anxiety, alcohol and drug abuse, or thinking about harming themselves or others. It's also common to have problems at work, in relationships, or with your physical health.

Sometimes, these problems happen because of your PTSD symptoms. For example, feeling numb and avoiding places can make it hard to have good relationships with your friends and family.

Getting treatment for PTSD can help with these other problems, too.



Why get treatment for PTSD?

Treatment works.
There are many treatment options for PTSD. In this booklet, we'll tell you about different talk therapies and medications that are proven to help people with PTSD.

For many people, these treatments can get rid of symptoms altogether. Others find they have fewer symptoms or feel that their symptoms are less intense.

After treatment, most people feel they have a **better quality of life.**

> It was difficult, that first time going, because I didn't think I really needed it. But once I got there and spoke with the counselor, I felt better when I left that day. I already felt better after the first session. — Michelle Rentas, US Army (1992–1995)

When PTSD isn't treated, it usually doesn't get better — and it may even get worse.

It's common to think that your PTSD symptoms will just go away over time. But this is very unlikely, especially if you've had symptoms for longer than a year. Even if you feel like you can handle your symptoms now, they may get worse over time.

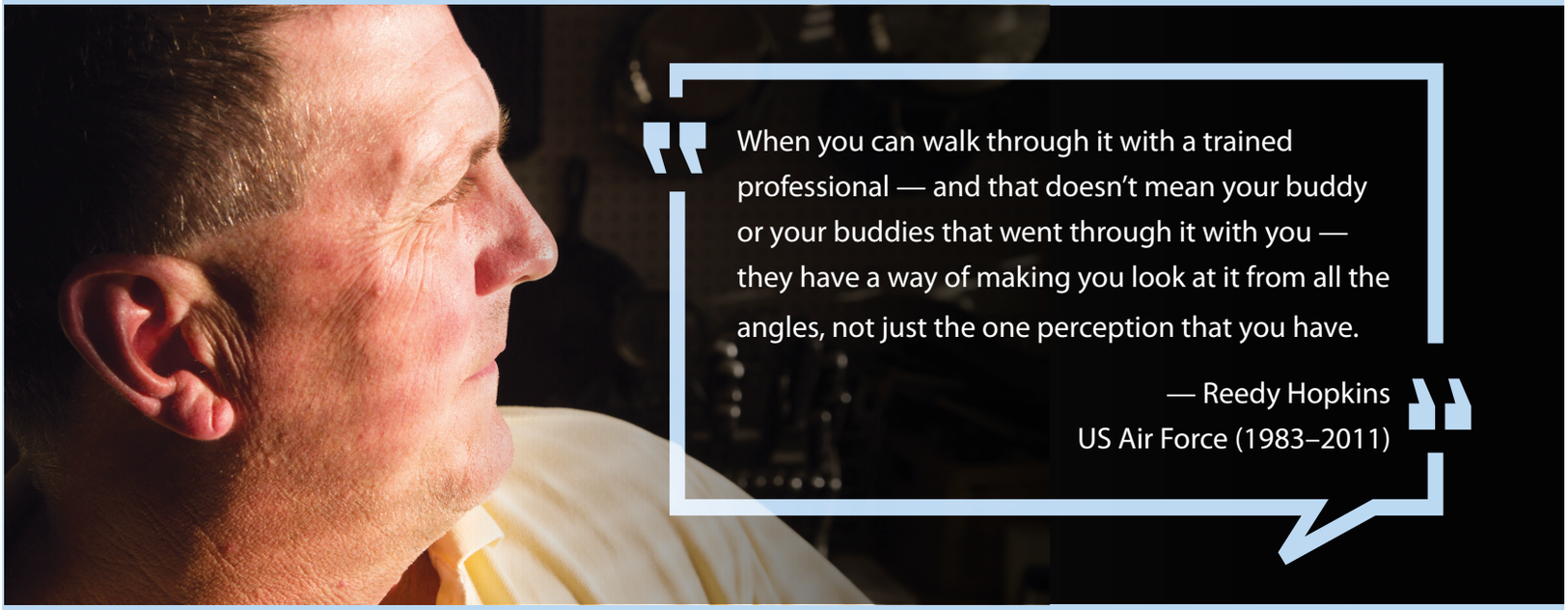
Getting treatment can help keep PTSD from causing problems in your relationships, your career, or your education — so you can live the way you want to.

> And she said, 'You're not afraid that it will affect your career?' And I said, 'No, it doesn't matter how it affects my career because I can't go on living the way I'm living…'
> — Reedy Hopkins, US Air Force (1983–2011)

Common questions about treatment

Can a therapist really understand what I've been through?

Therapists can treat your PTSD whether or not they have been through trauma themselves. What's important is that your therapist understands how you think about your experience, so she can teach you the skills you need to manage your symptoms.



Is it ever too late to get treatment for PTSD?

It's never too late. Treatment can help even if your trauma happened years ago. And treatment for PTSD has gotten much better over the years. If you tried treatment before and you're still having symptoms, it's a good idea to try again.

What if I don't feel ready for treatment?

It's normal to feel like you're not ready for treatment, or to come up with reasons why now isn't the right time — like you can't afford it or you're too busy. But not wanting to talk or think about the trauma can actually be a symptom of PTSD.

You may never feel truly ready to get help for PTSD — but if you're having symptoms, it's better to get treatment now than to wait. **The sooner you get treatment, the sooner you can start to feel better.**

> Getting ready for treatment is like, how do I know I'm ready to get in better shape? How do I know I'm ready to be a better father? How do I know I'm ready to be a better person? **If you're feeling pain, you're ready for treatment.** — Dr. Ron Acierno, Clinical Psychologist

What happens during PTSD treatment?

Your therapist or doctor will start by talking with you about your PTSD symptoms and your treatment options. Once you've chosen a type of treatment, he'll explain what will happen, how it will help you feel better, and why it works. **Remember, you can always ask questions about your treatment.**

Both talk therapy and medication are proven to treat PTSD.

Talk Therapy

In this booklet, we'll tell you about 4 talk therapies that are proven to help people with PTSD. In each of these talk therapies, you'll meet with a therapist once or twice a week, for 50 to 90 minutes. You and your therapist will have specific goals and topics to cover during each session. Talk therapy usually lasts for 3 to 4 months. Then, if you still have symptoms, you and your therapist can talk about other ways to manage them.

> PTSD therapy helps change your relationship with the trauma. Therapy isn't for erasing your memories. — Dr. Rebecca Liu, Clinical Psychologist

Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE)

People with PTSD often try to avoid things that remind them of the trauma. This can help you feel better in the moment, but in the long term it can keep you from recovering from PTSD.

In PE, you expose yourself to the thoughts, feelings, and situations that you've been avoiding. It sounds scary, but facing things you're afraid of in a safe way can help you learn that you don't need to avoid reminders of the trauma.

What happens during PE? Your therapist will ask you to talk about your trauma over and over. This will help you get more control of your thoughts and feelings about the trauma so you don't need to be afraid of your memories.

She will also help you work up to doing the things you've been avoiding. For example, let's say you avoid driving because it reminds you of an accident. At first, you might just sit in the car and practice staying calm with breathing exercises. Gradually, you'll work towards driving without being upset by memories of your trauma.

> I learned with the Prolonged Exposure, by re-living some of the most scariest moments of my life when I was in Iraq, you learn that it's there, but the intensity of the memory goes away. — Andrew Reeves, US Army (1999–2009)

Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT)

After a trauma, it's common to have negative thoughts — like thinking what happened is your fault or that the world is very dangerous. CPT helps you learn to identify and change these thoughts. Changing how you think about the trauma can help change how you feel.

What happens during CPT? You'll talk with your therapist and fill out worksheets about the negative thoughts and beliefs that are upsetting you. Then your therapist will help you challenge those thoughts and think about your trauma in a way that's less upsetting.

Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

People with PTSD react negatively to the memory of their traumas. EMDR can help you process these upsetting memories, thoughts, and feelings. You'll focus on specific sounds or movements while you talk about the trauma. This helps your brain work through the traumatic memories. Over time, you can change how you react to memories of your trauma.

What happens during EMDR? Your therapist will ask you to choose a memory from the trauma and identify the negative thoughts, emotions, and feelings in your body that go with it.

You'll think about this memory while you pay attention to a sound (like a beeping tone) or a movement (like your therapist's finger moving back and forth). Once the memory becomes less upsetting, you'll work on adding a positive thought.

Stress Inoculation Training (SIT)

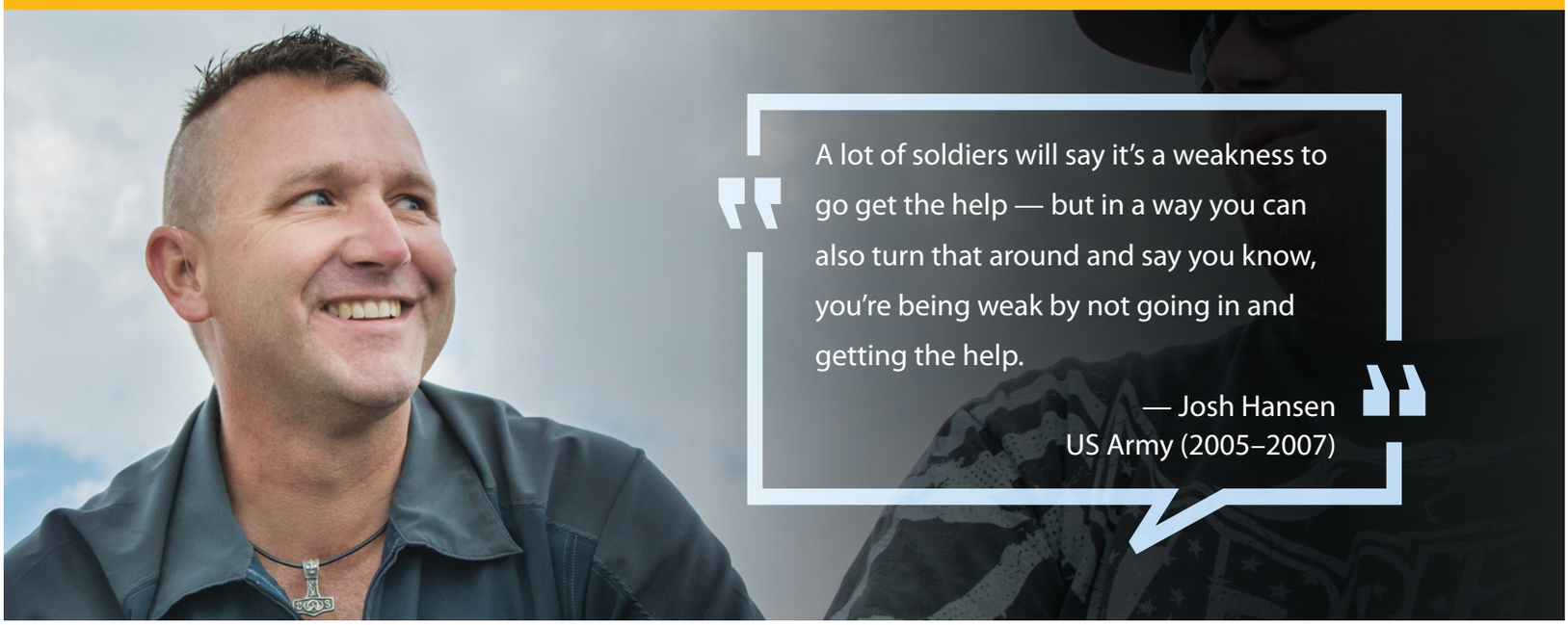
People with PTSD are often under a lot of stress. SIT teaches you skills for handling stressful situations that can help you manage your PTSD symptoms.

What happens during SIT? You and your therapist will talk about what's causing stress and how you cope with it. Then you'll learn and practice how to solve problems and deal with stress in your life.

What about support groups?

In a support group, you talk about your day-to-day problems with other people who have had similar experiences. They can be a good addition to PTSD treatment, or something you can do after you've gotten treatment — but they won't treat your PTSD.

Horace "Ace" Carter, US Army (1977–1999)



Medication

When you have PTSD, you may not have enough of certain chemicals in your brain that help you manage stress. **SSRIs** (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) and **SNRIs** (selective norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors) are medications that can help raise the level of these chemicals in your brain so you feel better.

Before starting to take medication to treat PTSD, you'll talk to a psychiatrist (a doctor who specializes in mental health). When you first start taking medication, you'll check in with the doctor often to talk about how the medication is working. You may need to try a few different medications to find one that works.

Medications can treat PTSD symptoms alone or with therapy — but only therapy treats the underlying cause of your symptoms. If you treat your PTSD symptoms only with medication, you'll need to keep taking it for it to keep working.

What about benzodiazepines?

Some doctors may prescribe a type of anxiety medication called benzodiazepines (or benzos) — but benzodiazepines aren't a good treatment for PTSD. They can be addictive, cause other mental health problems, and make PTSD therapy less effective.

If you've been taking benzodiazepines for a long time, talk to your doctor about making a plan to stop. Ask about PTSD treatments that are proven to work and other ways to manage your anxiety.

Where can I go to get help?

If you're a Veteran, check with the VA about whether you can get treatment there. Visit http://www.va.gov/directory/guide/PTSD.asp to find a VA PTSD program near you.

If you're looking for care outside the VA, ask your doctor for a referral to a mental health care provider who specializes in PTSD treatment, or visit https://findtreatment.samhsa.gov/ to search for providers in your area. When choosing a mental health care provider, here are some important things to consider:

- **Find a provider who uses PTSD treatments proven to work.**

  It's best if you can find someone who offers one of the treatments we've talked about in this booklet, since these treatments have strong evidence showing that they work. Many mental health centers in hospital or university systems offer these treatments.

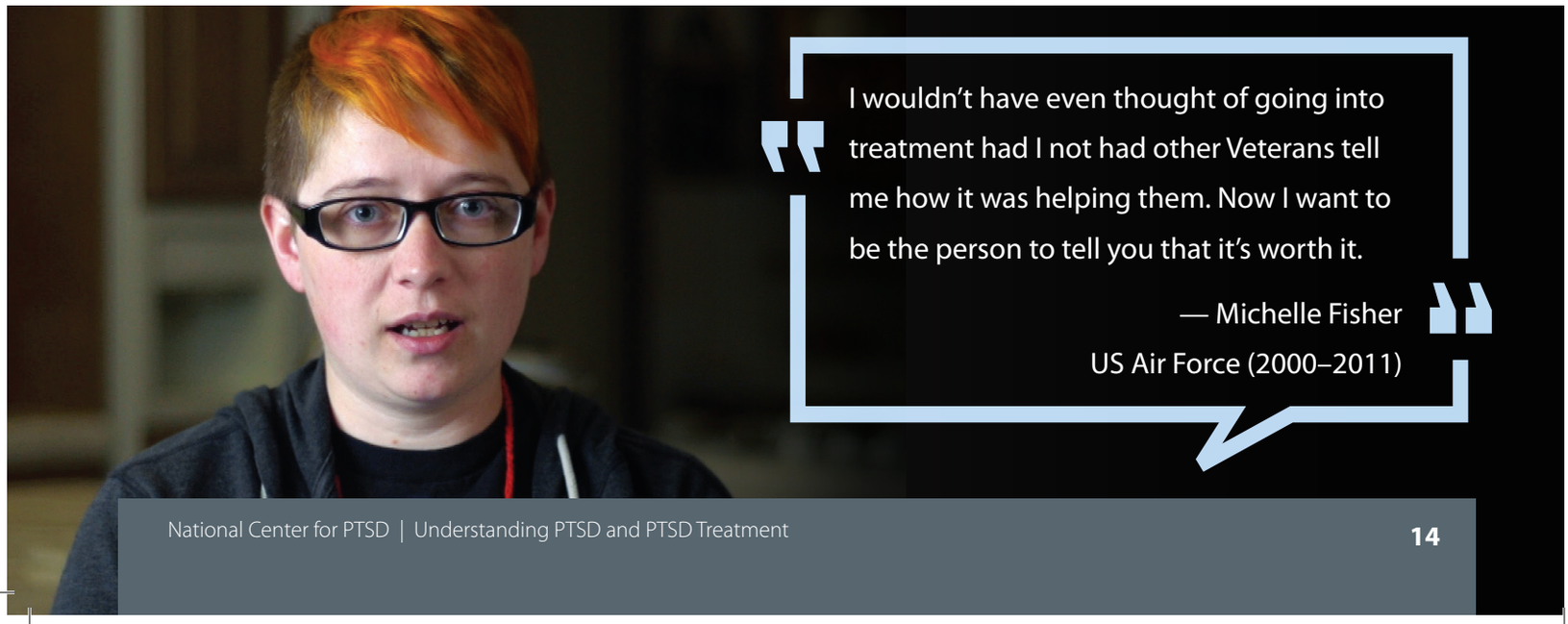
  What if I can't find anyone who offers these treatments? Many doctors can treat PTSD with medication, but it may be hard to find therapists who use the other treatments we've talked about. If you can't find a therapist who offers CPT, PE, EMDR, or SIT, ask about trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy. General cognitive behavioral therapy can also be a good alternative.

- **Find out what your insurance will cover.**

  If you have health insurance, check to see what mental health services are covered.

- **Find someone who is a good fit for you.**

  You and your therapist or doctor will work closely together, so it's important that you feel comfortable asking questions and talking about problems in your life. It's always okay to look for a different therapist or doctor if you're not happy with the person you're seeing.

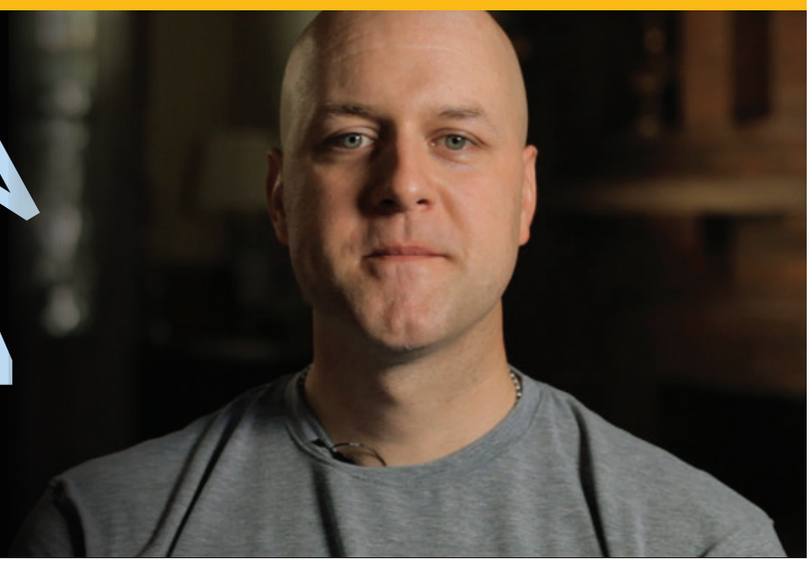


"I wouldn't have even thought of going into treatment had I not had other Veterans tell me how it was helping them. Now I want to be the person to tell you that it's worth it."

— Michelle Fisher
US Air Force (2000–2011)

My treatment has been a blessing to me and my family. It's hard to put into words just how you feel after you know that you can control your anger, and you can control your emotions.

— Bradley Seitz
US Marine Corps (2002–2005)



I see now how many things I was so afraid of before, and once I get in there and I do them, it's the right thing and it feels right. Today I go to games, and **I get to participate in my own life and my children's lives.**

— Mary C. "Katie" Weber
US Army (1993–1995)

I can carry on with my life and not feel so much guilt, so much anger and resentment. Besides my daughter and my wife, it's the best thing that's ever happened to me.
— Joe Duarte, US Army (2002–2008)

PTSD treatment can turn your life around

Arthur Jefferson, US Army (1978–1998)

ABOUTFACE

Find out about PTSD and PTSD treatment from Veterans who've been there.

www.ptsd.va.gov/aboutface

For more information and resources

visit the National Center for PTSD website at: www.ptsd.va.gov

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