

Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE)

Reducing the Hold Trauma Has on Your Life

After a traumatic experience, it is completely normal to avoid reminders of what happened. You may find yourself avoiding certain places, people, conversations, emotions or memories because they feel overwhelming or unsafe.

Whilst avoidance often provides short-term relief, it can unintentionally keep trauma symptoms going. Over time, life can become smaller as more situations begin to feel threatening.

Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE) is a highly effective, evidence-based treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It helps people gradually face trauma-related memories and situations in a safe, supported and structured way, allowing the brain to learn that these memories no longer represent a current threat.

What can Prolonged Exposure help with?

PE is recommended for people experiencing PTSD following experiences such as:

- Childhood abuse or neglect
- Sexual assault
- Domestic abuse
- Military or emergency service trauma
- Serious accidents
- Medical trauma
- Natural disasters
- Other frightening or life-threatening events

Research has consistently shown that Prolonged Exposure is one of the most effective psychological treatments available for PTSD.

How does Prolonged Exposure work?

Trauma memories are often stored differently from ordinary memories. Rather than feeling like something that happened in the past, they can feel as though they are happening all over again.

Many people understandably try to avoid reminders of the trauma in order to feel safe. However, avoidance often prevents the brain from learning that the danger has passed.

Prolonged Exposure gently helps you:

- Process traumatic memories safely.
- Reduce fear and anxiety linked to reminders of the trauma.
- Rebuild confidence in your ability to cope.
- Reconnect with the parts of life that have become restricted through fear or avoidance.

The goal is **not** to force you to relive your trauma. Instead, it is to help your brain recognise that the traumatic event belongs in the past rather than the present.

What happens during therapy?

Treatment is usually offered over **8–12 sessions**, although this can vary depending on your individual experiences and needs. If you have experienced multiple traumatic events or complex trauma, therapy may take longer to ensure the work is carried out safely and at a manageable pace.

Throughout therapy we work together using two main approaches.

Facing avoided situations (In Vivo Exposure)

Many people begin avoiding everyday situations after trauma because they have become associated with fear.

Together we gradually identify situations that feel safe but have become difficult because of the trauma. These might include:

- Visiting certain places.
- Driving or travelling.
- Spending time with other people.

- Rebuilding trust in relationships.
- Returning to hobbies or activities you once enjoyed.

These experiences are planned carefully and always involve **objectively safe situations**.

Over time, many clients notice that:

- Anxiety becomes more manageable.
- Confidence increases.
- Everyday life begins to feel less restricted.
- They discover they are more capable than they had believed.

Processing the traumatic memory

Another important part of PE involves gently working with the traumatic memory itself.

With your therapist's support, you will gradually revisit aspects of the memory in a structured and compassionate way. This allows your brain to process the experience differently, reducing its emotional intensity over time.

Many people notice that as therapy progresses:

- Flashbacks become less frequent.
- Nightmares reduce.
- Intrusive memories become less distressing.
- The memory feels more like something that happened in the past, rather than something they are continually reliving.
- Feelings of fear, guilt or shame begin to lessen.

What are the benefits of Prolonged Exposure?

As therapy progresses, many people find they are able to:

- Feel less controlled by fear.
- Reduce avoidance behaviours.
- Return to activities that are important to them.
- Feel more present in everyday life.

- Develop greater confidence in their ability to manage difficult emotions.
- Build a renewed sense of safety and resilience.

The aim is not to forget what happened, but to reduce the power it continues to have over your life today.

Is Prolonged Exposure right for everyone?

Although PE is one of the most effective treatments for PTSD, it is not always the first step in therapy.

Before beginning trauma-focused work, it is important that you feel emotionally safe and have sufficient coping strategies in place. Depending on your individual circumstances, we may first focus on developing emotional regulation, grounding techniques and stabilisation skills.

Therapy is always tailored to your needs, and we will work together to decide when you feel ready to begin processing traumatic memories.

A compassionate, collaborative approach

Beginning trauma therapy can feel daunting, but you will never be expected to face difficult memories alone.

I work in a trauma-informed and collaborative way, ensuring that we move at a pace that feels manageable for you. My role is to provide a safe, supportive environment where healing can take place without judgement or pressure.

If you would like to explore whether Prolonged Exposure Therapy is the right approach for you, please feel free to get in touch.