

# Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

## Unpacking the Layers

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PTSD Unplugged by Pamela Hall, Ph.D.

YOU CAN GET BETTER FROM PTSD, BUT IT'S NOT EASY.  
YOU'RE GONNA NEED A BUDDY WHO'LL HAVE YOUR BACK.  
IT'LL TAKE LONGER THAN YOU WANT IT TO TAKE.  
YOU CAN LEAVE THE WAR BEHIND YOU.



PTS symptoms are unlike  
other mental health symptoms

TRIGGER WARNING/TW

CONTENT WARNING/CW

Any discussion of *Posttraumatic Stress Disorder* can activate PTS symptoms.

The most frequent PTS symptom pattern in VA exams has been mild-moderate and fluctuating.

Moral injury is a common layer contributing to depressive symptoms.

Avoidance of learning about PTSD is endemic.

It's an uphill battle to end the stigma.



# What causes PTSD symptoms?

- Terrific stressors
  - Changes that benefit us but still exert pressure or tension
- Trying stressors
  - Everyday challenges that can be changed and/or eliminated
- Troubling stressors
  - Requiring new skills or recovering from injury or illness
- Tragic stressors
  - Loss of people, places, positions
- Traumatic stressors
  - Extraordinary and life threatening



## Psychological Trauma Defined

### DSM V, Criterion A

#### Traumatic stress exposure as the deepest layer

Not an ordinary day, not business as usual, something happens that shifts our brains:

- Requires a survival response
  - fight, flight, freeze, fawn
- Shifts to muscle memory
- Shuts off empathy, sympathy, time stamping
  - doesn't matter how this makes me feel until I'm safe again

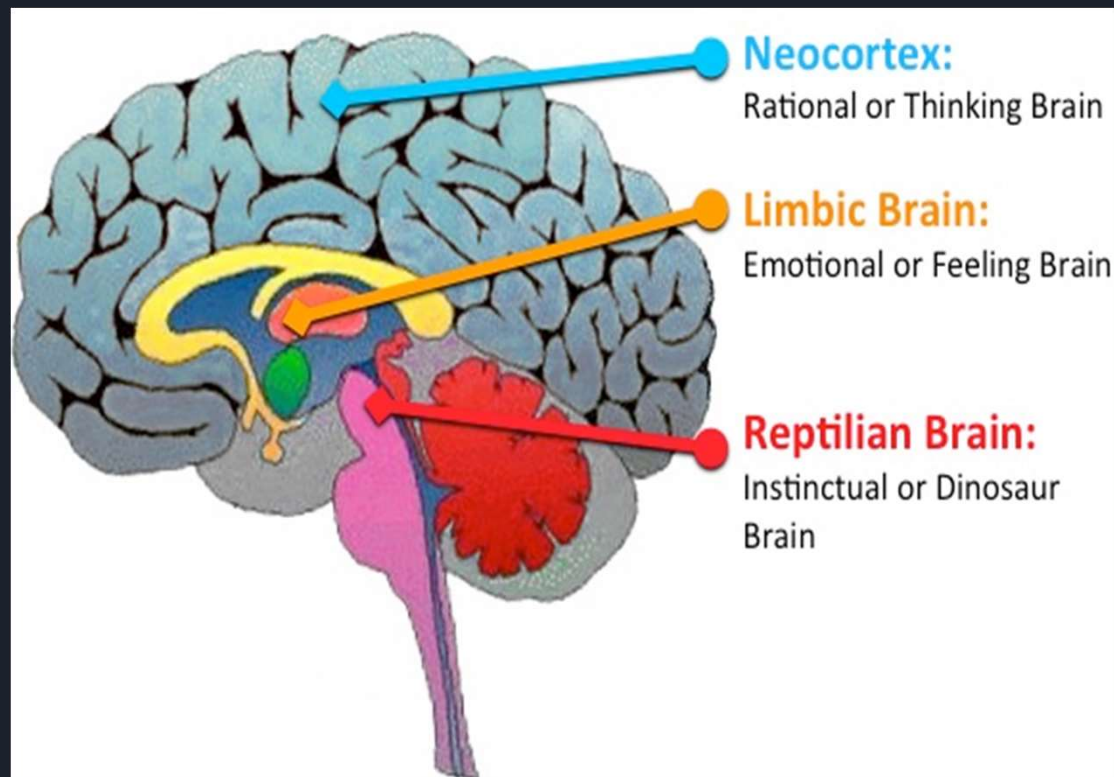
Some things that make this brain alteration happen are:

- combat, terrorism, torture, seeking political asylum
- kidnapping, sexual assault, physical assault, criminal threat
- natural disasters, life-threatening workplace injuries, other man-made disasters
- on the job exposure to these things happening to others

# Psychological Trauma Defined

## DSM V, Criterion A

### What causes PTS reactivity





## Trauma Memory DSM V, Criterion B

Being haunted by what happened as a unique layer

### Unprocessed sensory data

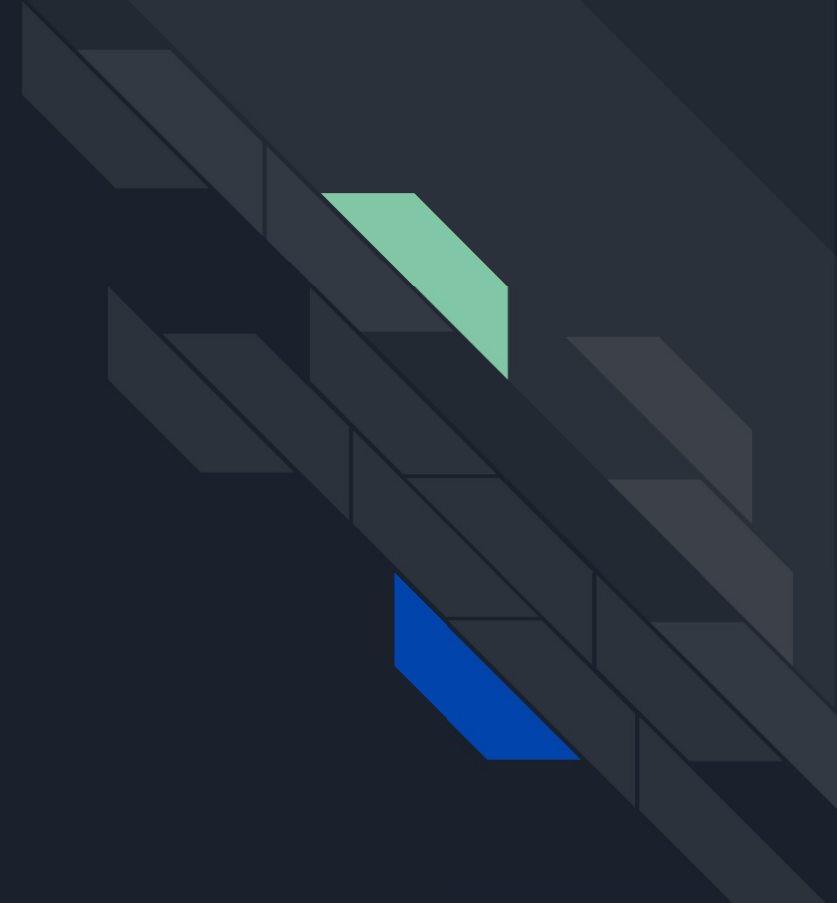
- A moment in time frozen in time
- A bubble holding the stuff that long term memories are made of
  - Sights, sounds, smells, tastes, physical feelings
  - Gut reactions like fear, excitement, doubt, shame

Any type of memory is stored along the lines of senses and gut reactions

- Trauma memory is activated by
  - Anything with similar sensations
  - Anything that leads to a similar gut reaction

You may be an undigested bit of  
beef, a blot of mustard, a crumb of  
cheese, a fragment of underdone  
potato. There's more of gravy than  
of grave about you, whatever you  
are!

**Charles Dickens, A Christmas Carol**







Avoidance  
DSM V, Criterion C  
Avoiding activation as a layer

The world becomes smaller and tighter  
to avoid activation  
to feel safe

Predictability is welcome  
People are not

Because memories can be activated, avoidance isn't effective.



Negative alterations in cognition and behavior

DSM V, Criterion D

Protective beliefs provide a defensive layer

Deciding the world and its people are not safe

Preparing for the worst

Trusting no one

Wanting nothing

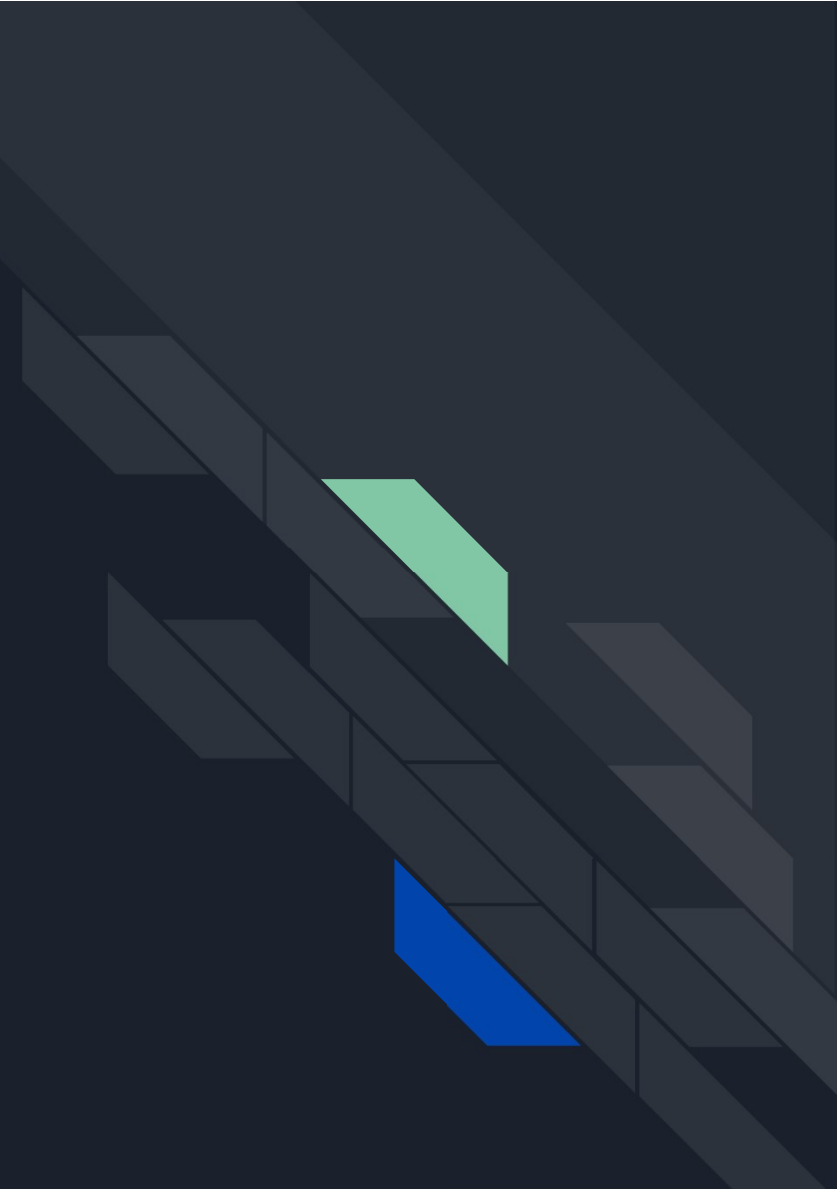
Pleasure is distracting

Sleep is dangerous

Using these filters buffers our brain against activation

# Moral Injury

Acting or witnessing behaviors that go against an individual's values and moral beliefs.





## Hyperaroused brain patterns

### DSM V, Criterion E

#### Layers of alert and alarm associated with Criterion A

Irritability and agitation vs. temperament

Risk taking vs. addiction or compulsivity

Hypervigilance vs. situational awareness

Exaggerated startle response vs. being jumpy

Problems with concentration vs. ADD/ADHD

Sleep disturbance vs. insomnia



## Functional Impairment vs. Disability

Impairment: Diminishment or loss of function or ability due to symptoms

Disability: Symptom patterns that make it more difficult to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions); identified by diagnosis with severity rating

- Impairment may not always result in disability.
- Disability results from an impairment.
- Both impairment and disability can be temporary or permanent.

PTSD is not a life sentence of unemployment



## Disability varies with symptoms and their severity

### Functional work impairment by symptoms

- Sleep disturbance
- Cognitive complaints
- Agitation/Irritability
- Mistrust of others
- Dissociation

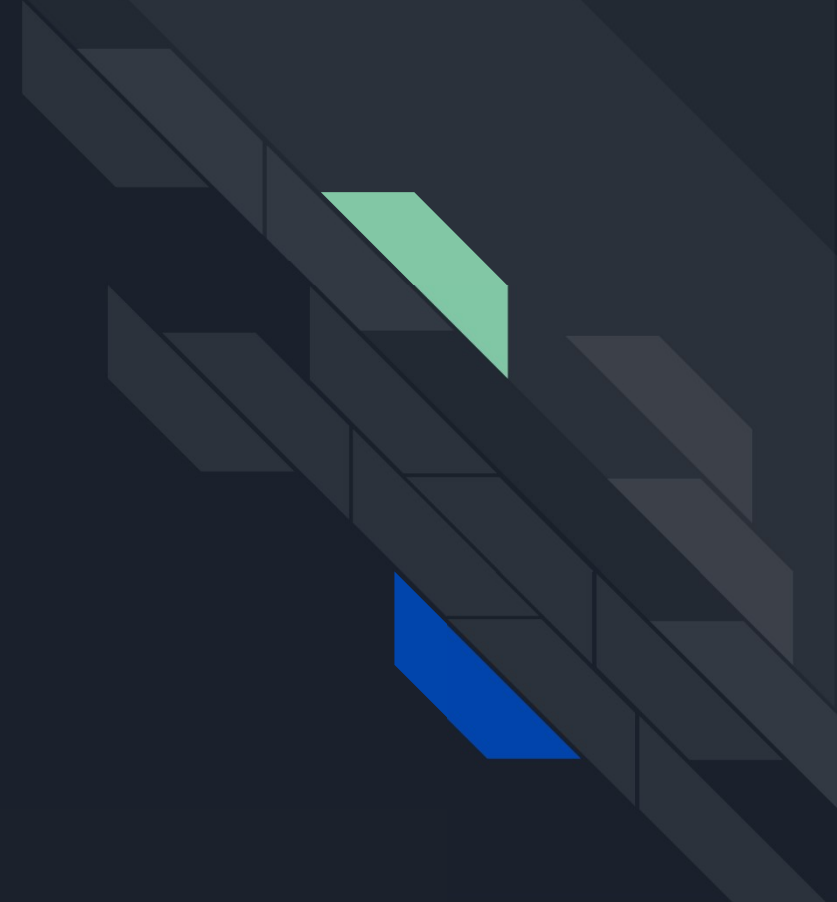
### More frequent and severe symptoms leads to more occupational disability

- Mild PTSD does not correlate with functional work impairment
- Moderate PTSD correlates with a range of temporary/permanent partial disability
- Severe PTSD correlates with temporary partial/total disability

## **Violence leaves more than just a memory**

The most important thing to know about PTSD is what has been happening in your brain since you experienced that life-threatening event. While your thoughts and feelings about that day grab your attention daily, trauma memory is what has been grabbing your brain.

Chapter 2, PTSD Unplugged





PTSD Treatment: Know Your Options  
Veteran Health Administration  
YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FeLLt39DI8A&t=22s>



# PTSD: Unpacking the Layers

## #strongertogether



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