Treatment of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

In November of 2007, the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS) issued new post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) practice guidelines. Using a grading system from “A” to “E,” the guidelines label several PTSD treatments as “A” treatments based on their high degree of empirical support. They include:

- **Prolonged-exposure therapy:** the therapist guides the client to recall traumatic memories in a controlled fashion so that clients eventually regain mastery of their thoughts and feelings around the traumatic incident. The recall is done in a gradual, controlled and repeated manner, until the person can evaluate their circumstances realistically.

- **Cognitive-processing therapy:** a form of cognitive behavioral therapy, this includes an exposure component but places greater emphasis on cognitive strategies to help people alter erroneous thinking that has emerged because of the traumatic event.

- **Stress-inoculation training:** another form of cognitive behavioral therapy which involves teaching techniques to manage and reduce anxiety, such as breathing, muscle relaxation, and positive self talk.

- **Eye-movement desensitization and reprocessing, or EMDR:** guiding eye movements at the same time as the recounting of the traumatic event.

- **Medications:** specifically, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors. Two in particular, paroxetine (Paxil) and sertraline (Zoloft) have been approved by the Food and Drug Administration for use in PTSD.
Recent advances in developing treatments promise to help even more people cope with PTSD. On a broader scale, more research is needed on treating PTSD and psychiatric comorbidities such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. For further information, please see “PTSD treatments grow in evidence, effectiveness” in the January, 2008 Monitor in Psychology (Volume 39, No. 1).

For further information regarding this article please contact Karen Kuehn Howell, Ph.D., at the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 1256 Briarcliff Road, N.E., Suite 309W, Atlanta, Georgia, 30306. You can also phone us at 404-712-9829 or visit our website at http://www.emory.edu/MSACD

The Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project is funded in part by the Georgia Department of Human Resources Division of Public Health.