

Edna Foa

PTSD AND EXPOSURE THERAPY

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Edna Foa is one of the major researchers behind today's evidence-based treatment of PTSD and anxiety. Her theory of how fear is processed, and the therapy she developed from it — Prolonged Exposure — have helped shape how trauma is understood and treated around the world.

Emotional Processing Theory Foa & Kozak (1986) — the foundation of her approach

HOW FEAR IS KEPT ALIVE — AND CHANGED

The Fear Memory

After trauma, fear is thought to be stored as a memory network linking reminders, bodily responses and meanings such as *"the world is dangerous"* or *"I can't cope"*. Avoiding reminders brings short-term relief but prevents this memory from being updated.

Foa proposed that recovery requires two conditions:

CONDITION 1

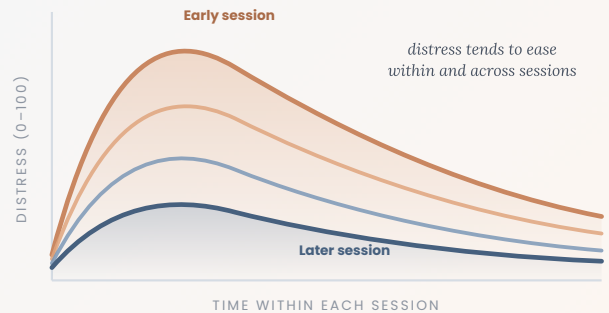
Activate the memory

Safely engaging with the fear rather than avoiding it.

CONDITION 2

Add new learning

Taking in information that contradicts the fear, e.g. *"I can remember this and stay safe."*



Illustrative pattern. Newer "inhibitory learning" views suggest what matters most is learning safety, even if distress doesn't fully fall.

Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE) The structured treatment Foa developed for PTSD



Psychoeducation

Understanding common trauma reactions and how avoidance keeps PTSD going.



Breathing retraining

A simple, slowed breathing skill to help manage everyday tension.



In vivo exposure

Gradually approaching safe situations, places or activities that have been avoided.



Imaginal exposure & processing

Revisiting the trauma memory aloud, then reflecting on its meaning with the therapist.

Typically 8–15 sessions

About 90 minutes each

Sessions recorded for home practice

Paced with a trained therapist

Evidence & Common Concerns What research has found

THE EVIDENCE BASE

One of the Most Studied PTSD Treatments

- ✓ **Recommended.** PE is strongly recommended in major PTSD guidelines, including those of the American Psychological Association and US VA/DoD.
- ✓ **Large effects.** A meta-analysis of controlled trials found large improvements compared with control conditions.
- ✓ **Across groups.** Adapted for adolescents (PE-A), it outperformed supportive counselling in a randomised trial.

COMMON CONCERNS

Questions People Often Ask

"Won't talking about it make it worse?"

Some people feel a temporary rise in distress, but research found this was uncommon and not linked with poorer outcomes.

"Do I have to face everything at once?"

No — exposure is gradual, collaborative and paced with your therapist.

"Is it right for me?"

A trained clinician can help decide, alongside other options such as CPT or EMDR.

Key Contributions Highlights from a career spanning decades



Avoidance keeps fear alive. Approaching it — safely, gradually and with support — allows recovery.

SOURCES

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