Beyond PTSD

# What is Continuous Traumatic Stress?

The narratives of street intervention workers suggest that PTSD and Complex PTSD are incomplete frameworks for capturing the experience of traumatic stress in violence reduction work. The term Continuous Traumatic Stress (CTS) was first proposed by Straker and colleagues[[1]](#footnote-1). While they share similar symptoms, CTS is differentiated from Complex PTSD (cPTSD) in two primary ways: the context in which the threat of harm occurs and the fact that the threat of harm is still ongoing in the present or future.

In situations of CTS, there is a real, often faceless and unpredictable, yet pervasive and substantive threat of harm in the present or future. This differs from cPTSD in that individuals with a history of cPTSD often know their perpetrators intimately, and the harm or threat of harm is in the past. In contrast, the legitimacy of an ongoing, faceless threat in CTS leads to individuals being primarily worried about current or future danger, even if past trauma or symptoms of cPTSD coexist. This is the main difference between symptoms of CTS and cPTSD: individuals suffering from CTS are less likely to complain of intrusive memories.

*There are certain areas in Chicago, it's like, I wouldn't walk a cat through there. But we help them guys there too, so it pushes me but same time, in the back of my head is like, I don't want anybody to pull up and start shooting and I end up getting shot and my family's, you know, bury me or come to see me in the hospital. You know, to see if I'm gonna make it through. I don't want my family going through that. But I know it's a risk that we take every day when we do what we do.*

If one acknowledges that the context in which street outreach workers operate is one of real, ongoing threat, then corresponding psychological and behavioral responses, such as feeling chronically on guard or emotionally reactive, avoiding objectively safe situations, or having a rigid worldview (viewing things as “black and white”, “all or nothing”, or holding tightly onto other extreme beliefs), may be seen as an adaptive response given the primary human goal of survival. Rather than viewing the individual’s responses as problematic, it is the problematic context which is leading to these behaviors, and the behaviors ultimately make sense given the circumstances.

An additional defining factor of CTS is that it is experienced primarily by systematically oppressed, deprived, and marginalized populations in communities where there is a failure of the usual systems of law and order to provide protection due to ineffectiveness, lack of capacity, or corruption[[2]](#footnote-2). In other words, individuals who experience CTS often have a long history of being harmed and the means through which most communities maintain law, order, and safety (such as the police) do not work for them.

# Food for Thought

* + Does your team express or acknowledge concerns about their safety in their work? If yes, how and when do they express anxiety about the fear of being harmed? How have you/leadership responded when it was expressed? If no, do you think it is because they don’t have concerns about their safety, or don’t feel comfortable expressing it?
  + What are some ways in which it could be seen as adaptive to be constantly on guard, avoid seemingly unsafe situations, and view the world in rigid or “black and white” ways?
  + Participants served by street outreach workers often share the same fears for their safety due to their experience living in a community with chronic violence. What similarities do you see between the participants your organization serves and your employees in regards to how they cope with CTS? Are there ways in which your organization can use the same or similar tools provided to help participants struggling with CTS in order to address the needs of street outreach workers?

1. Straker, G., & the Sanctuaries Counselling Team. (1987). The continuous traumatic stress syndrome: The single therapeutic interview. Psychology in Society, 8, 48 –78. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Eagle, G., & Kaminer, D. (2013). Continuous traumatic stress: Expanding the lexicon of traumatic stress. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology, 19*(2), 85–99. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)