



Learning Together through an Evidence-based Treatment: Prolonged Exposure Therapy

Prolonged Exposure (PE) Therapy is an evidence-based treatment for adults experiencing symptoms of PTSD. Sometimes, survivors of trauma continue to be haunted by their past experiences. These memories, thoughts, and feelings are often painful and difficult to live with. PE Therapy aims to reduce PTSD symptoms by helping individuals approach trauma-related thoughts, feelings, and situations that had previously been avoided. This gradual exposure process helps reduce the distress associated with trauma-related thoughts, feelings, and situations that cause PTSD symptoms. Treatment is delivered by a therapist over 8 to fifteen 90-minute sessions. [Click here to learn more about PE.](#)

Robert (Bob) Dilenge works as a group counselor at [Merakey Parkside Recovery](#), a substance use program that is participating in the CBH Prolonged Exposure Initiative with the Center for the Treatment and Study of Anxiety (CTSA). Bob completed his first PE case with Adam who had experienced multiple traumas as a young man, including being shot. The following interview was conducted with Bob and Adam to illuminate the parallel process of delivering and receiving PE treatment.



EPIC: How did you learn about and get connected with PE?

Adam: I learned about it from my therapist Bob. He knew about my trauma and the things I went through from me being in his group. As soon as he asked me if I would be interested, I said, "Sure!" I knew I needed help and had a problem. PE was a blessing.

EPIC: Why did you think Adam would be a good candidate for PE?

Bob: What happened is during groups and individuals he would speak about his experience being shot. We (Adam and I) thought it would be a good idea for us to do it (PE). He had a lot of anger issues with the experience of being shot. Adam was unapproachable because of being scared. It was all a defense mechanism because he wanted to make sure he wouldn't be hurt again.

EPIC: Were there any challenges related to PE for you?

Adam: Ya, sure. I mean starting something new and weird is always a challenge. Listening to my story over and over again in my ear, that was a challenge. And going back to the place where it happened. That was the

biggest challenge. Closing your eyes and visualizing yourself being there. You remember things you have forgotten. I could smell the blood, gunsmoke. The challenge was going back and reliving it over and over again.

EPIC: When did you know it first started working for Adam?

Bob: I guess it was about the second or third imaginal session. Because during the processing phase, from the first imaginal, he would put his hand inside his sweatshirt. After processing the first time, I asked him why he did that and he explained that he kept his gun there in the past. After the second or third imaginal he stopped doing that... During one of the in-vivos, I had pulled up a video of a truck backfiring. He reported that in the past when he heard a truck backfiring that he had grabbed his niece and took cover. The first time he heard the video with me he cringed and then the second or third he didn't react at all.

EPIC: When did you know it first started working?

Adam: The day he played a recording of backfiring/firecracker sounds, stuff like that and I didn't jump like I usually did. I just laughed at it. That right there was a big breakthrough. Normally I would react totally different. I would jump up and be scared. And this time I didn't do that and I knew it was working. I could go back to the place where I almost died and not be scared.

EPIC: What is the biggest change you noticed in Adam after PE?

Bob: He is no longer angry. His whole personality changed. He comes into the clinic smiling and joking around with everyone. He has become a favorite in the clinic.

EPIC: How do you feel PE helps your recovery from substance use?

Adam: Yes it did. Because part of my trauma involved drugs and alcohol so they are connected. Being shot was due to me [being] involved in the sales of illegal narcotics and me not willing to go back to that lifestyle and using drugs, particularly that situation. Why would I want to go back to that? Why would I want to use a substance that almost got me killed? Actually the substance almost killed me at one time... PE helped me stay away from it.

EPIC: How do you feel PE helps Adam's recovery from substance use?

Bob: Actually after completing PE, he hasn't been using substances, he stopped taking a lot of his psychiatric medication. The one thing that he stayed off was his medication that helps nightmares.

EPIC: What do you like most about PE?

Adam: That it works if you believe in what you are doing. You got to believe PE will work. You have to be dedicated to it. There are people at my clinic like Bob who will take that journey with me... People see the change in me and ask me what happened and how was it. I tell them about these sessions (PE) and they want to be a part of it. A lot of them got involved with it because of me. I tell them it's not because of me. You wanted to get better.

EPIC: What would you say to someone who is skeptical about PE?

Bob: I don't think I have to say too much. I have a new client who told me about a trauma he experienced in group. I asked Adam to come in and talk to this client about his experience with PE. The client said "I want to do that, put my name on the list."

Prolonged Exposure Therapy Providers

Special Thanks to Bob and Adam for sharing their success story related to PE. Click [here](#) to learn more information about **Merakey** which is an [EPIC EBP Program Designated Provider](#) for Prolonged Exposure Therapy in an Outpatient Mental Health Setting.

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