

Overview: Trauma-Related Disorders

When Substance Use Offers an Escape from the Past



What Are Trauma-Related Disorders?

Trauma-related disorders develop when the mind and body cannot process a traumatic or overwhelming experience. Rather than healing over time, the person remains stuck—reliving the event, avoiding reminders, or struggling to function in ways that didn't exist before the trauma. These disorders represent a fundamental disruption in how the brain processes threat, memory, and safety.

The Trauma-Related Disorders Spectrum

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD develops when the **mind cannot process a traumatic event**, leaving the person stuck in a persistent state of threat.

- Intrusive memories or nightmares that feel like reliving the event
- Avoiding people, places, or situations that bring up the trauma
- Numbness, detachment, or inability to feel positive emotions

Acute Stress Disorder

Acute Stress Disorder shares many features with PTSD but occurs immediately after trauma, **lasting from three days to one month**.

- Severe anxiety or panic in the days following a traumatic event
- Dissociation, feeling detached from one's body or surroundings
- Difficulty sleeping, focusing, or an exaggerated startle response

Adjustment Disorders

Adjustment Disorders develop when a **life event causes extreme distress** and impairs daily functioning. Examples include job loss, divorce, or illness.

- Depressed mood, hopelessness, or crying spells disproportionate to the stressor
- Excessive worry or anxiety that interferes with work or relationships
- Reckless behavior, rule-breaking, or acting out in response to stress

Prevalence:
6% of U.S. adults¹

Co-Occurrence:
2-4x more likely to develop a substance use disorder²

Relapse Risk:
High
PTSD is associated with higher risk for treatment dropout and relapse³

Sources: ¹ National Center for PTSD, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. ² National Comorbidity Survey (NCS), PMC. ³ PMC, Pre-treatment Predictors of Dropout from Prolonged Exposure Therapy.

How Trauma-Related Disorders Contribute to Relapse

Substances offer trauma survivors an escape from intrusive memories, relief from hypervigilance, and numbness to unbearable emotions. This creates one of the most treatment-resistant patterns in addiction.

- 1) Substances Help Them Feel Safe**
Substances quiet the flashbacks and the hypervigilance.
- 2) Short-Term Programs Can't Process the Trauma**
A 30-day program ends before the trauma work begins.
- 3) Without Treating the Disorder, Relapse Is Likely**
Unaddressed pain leads back to the familiar solution.

“With trauma, the brain is doing exactly what it’s designed to do—protect. But those protective responses become the very thing keeping them in addiction. Recovery means helping the brain learn it’s finally safe enough to let go.”



Meghan Bohlman, LPC-S, LCDC, EMDR-Trained
Executive Clinical Director, Burning Tree Ranch

How Trauma-Related Disorders Are Identified & Diagnosed

- Thorough trauma history, including events the client may not initially identify as traumatic
- Observation over time to distinguish trauma responses from withdrawal symptoms
- Assessment of avoidance behaviors that may mask the severity of symptoms
- Evaluation of how substance use patterns relate to trauma symptoms and anniversaries

Long-Term Treatment for Trauma-Related Disorders and Addiction

Trauma-related disorders don't respond to quick interventions. The brain needs time to feel safe before it can process what happened. Our **long-term, progress-based model** provides the extended safety and clinical depth that trauma recovery demands.

- 1) Accurate Diagnosis Comes First**
Trauma history emerges gradually, and helps guide treatment planning.
- 2) Treating Both Conditions Together**
Without addressing the underlying trauma, sobriety is fragile.
- 3) Measuring Progress by Behavior, Not Days**
Clients advance when they demonstrate genuine capacity to process difficult emotions without substances.



Have Other Treatment Programs Missed the Deeper Issues?

Burning Tree Ranch is the Nation's only authentic long-term treatment program for chronic relapse. Call us at (866) 287-2877 or visit us online at www.BurningTree.com.

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