

## How to Talk about It without Talking about It: Cognitive Processing Therapy Offers Trauma Symptom Relief without Violating Cultural Norms

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**Abstract :** Humans naturally wish they could forget traumatic experiences. To help prevent future harm, however, the human brain has evolved to retain data about experiences of threat, alarm, or violation. When given compassionate support and assistance with thinking helpfully and realistically about traumatic events, most people can adjust to experiencing hardships, albeit with residual sad, unfortunate memories. Persistent, recurrent, intrusive memories, difficulty sleeping, emotion dysregulation, and avoidance of reminders, however, may be symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Brain scans show that PTSD affects brain functioning. We currently have no physical means of restoring the system of brain structures and functions involved with PTSD. Medications may ease some symptoms but not others. However, forms of "talk therapy" with cognitive components have been found by researchers to reduce, even resolve, a broad spectrum of trauma symptoms. Many cultures have taboos against talking about hardships. Individuals may present themselves to mental health care professionals with severe, disabling trauma symptoms but, because of cultural norms, be unable to speak about them. In China, for example, relationship expectations may include the belief, "Bad things happening in the family should stay in the family (jiāchǒu bùkě wàiyán 家丑不外扬)." The concept of "family (jiā 家)" may include partnerships, close and extended families, communities, companies, and the nation itself. In contrast to many trauma therapies, Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder asks its participants to focus not on "what" happened but on "why" they think the trauma(s) occurred. The question "why" activates and exercises cognitive functioning. Brain scans of individuals with PTSD reveal executive functioning portions of the brain inadequately active, with emotion centers overly active. CPT conceptualizes PTSD as a network of cognitive distortions that keep an individual "stuck" in this under-functioning and over-functioning dynamic. Through asking participants forms of the question "why," plus offering a protocol for examining answers and relinquishing unhelpful beliefs, CPT assists individuals in consciously reactivating the cognitive, executive functions of their brains, thus restoring normal functioning and reducing distressing trauma symptoms. The culturally sensitive components of CPT that allow people to "talk about it without talking about it" may offer the possibility for worldwide relief from symptoms of trauma.

**Keywords :** cognitive processing therapy (CPT), cultural norms, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), trauma recovery

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