Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a common mental health diagnosis given to trauma survivors. Studies show that as many as 50% of those who have been sexually assaulted develop PTSD. The mental health disorder is characterized by intrusive memories of the trauma, avoidance of situations or experiences that remind us of the trauma, negative changes in mood or thinking, and changes in emotional reactions such as being irritable and hypervigilant. This is what is called Classic PTSD.

Some survivors, though, develop a more pervasive and complicated form of the mental health disorder referred to as Complex PTSD. Although this diagnosis has not yet been formally recognized by the medical organizations approve of “new” diagnoses it is well known within the psychiatric and psychological community.

While PTSD can develop with exposure to one traumatic event, Complex PTSD develops after prolonged exposure to a traumatic or abusive environment that the victim cannot escape or believes they cannot escape due to grooming or threats to their safety or the safety of someone they love. Complex PTSD is most likely to develop if this protracted period of abuse covers the prime developmental ages of 3 to 8 years old. Abuse that spans this time frame is likely to cause pervasive changes to the victim’s personality and worldview.

Complex PTSD is categorized by:

- Difficulties with attachment
- Biological problems such as sensory integration problems, changes to the brain, and an increased risk of developing auto-immune disorders
- Damage to Executive Functioning
- Dissociation including Dissociative Identity Disorder
- Behavior problems such as difficulties with impulse control, aggression, self-harming behavior, and sleep disturbances
- Problems with emotional regulation
- A disturbed self-concept that results in body image problems, low self-worth, and excessive shame

Treatment for Complex PTSD needs to be provided over a lengthy period of time as the problems and difficulties are deeply rooted in the abuse victim’s personality and perceptions of themselves and the world.

The best treatment is a variety of therapy methods:

Emotionally Focused Therapy, Somatic Therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy, Expressive Therapies, Dialectical Behavior Therapy and Group Therapy. NOTE: Complex PTSD may be harder to recover from than Classic PTSD, but it is entirely possible.