While Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) can develop after an individual experiences a traumatic event, some survivors end up with a more pervasive and complicated form of the mental health disorder referred to as Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD).

C-PTSD develops in childhood after prolonged exposure to a traumatic or abusive environment where the victim cannot escape, or believes they cannot escape due to grooming or threats to their safety or the safety of someone they love. Typically, C-PTSD stems from this type of chronic abuse during the critical developmental period of three to eight years old. The abuse can take any number of forms: emotional, sexual, verbal, and/or physical. Neglect and a chaotic, dysfunctional family upbringing can also contribute to an individual having C-PTSD. Abuse which spans this developmental time frame is likely to cause pervasive changes to the survivor’s personality and worldview. Survivors are “groomed” (also referred to as “manipulated over a period of time”) to believe they are unlovable and unworthy of love and safety. Survivors are also often blamed for causing their own abuse. They are taught by their abuser(s) that they are powerless to keep themselves safe and that the world is a dangerous, unfriendly place. When these erroneous beliefs are taught and reinforced over a lengthy period during critical brain development, these unhealthy thinking patterns become hard wired into the survivor’s personality.

C-PTSD is categorized by:

- Emotional flashbacks which are different than the flashbacks typically seen in PTSD patients
- Difficulties with attachment
- Biological problems such as sensory integration problems, changes to the brain, and an increased risk of developing autoimmune 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

Although C-PTSD has not yet been formally recognized in the diagnostic statistical manual of mental disorders (5th edition) C-PTSD is well known within the psychiatric and psychological community. C-PTSD may be harder to recover from than Classic PTSD, but it is entirely possible. Treatment needs to be provided over a long period of time, as the problems and difficulties are deeply rooted in the abuse survivor’s personality and perceptions of themselves and the world. Neuroplasticity will allow us to develop new, healthy beliefs and thoughts that can replace the ones we learned in our abusive childhood.

The very best treatment approach for C-PTSD is a multi-pronged approach which provides a variety of therapy methods: Emotionally Focused Therapy, Somatic Therapy, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing Therapy, Expressive Therapies, Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and Group Therapy.

Lastly, grieving the healthy childhood we did not have, as well as choosing to establish and maintain healthy interpersonal boundaries with those who abused you or enabled your abuse, are also an integral part of the healing needed to fully recover from C-PTSD.

As painful as this healing journey can be, it is possible to heal from your child abuse if/when you choose to limit contact with your abuser(s) and those who enabled your abuse.

NOTE: Child Abuse is damaging and even deadly to adult survivors. Apart from consciously choosing to limit contact with your abuser(s) there is no cure or true healing. You deserve to heal. You deserve to live in peace, away from the effects of your abuser. We are here to support you, encourage you and lead the charge.