



# Webinar

Organized by the Canadian Institute for Military and Veteran Health Research

**Speaker:**

Dr. Barbara Olasov Rothbaum

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## Innovative treatments for PTSD: From psychedelics to virtual reality

Barbara Olasov Rothbaum, PhD, is director of the Emory Healthcare Veterans Program. Dr. Rothbaum specializes in research on the treatment of anxiety disorders, particularly PTSD. She has been studying treatments for PTSD since 1986 and has developed, tested, and disseminated some of the most innovative and effective treatments. She is the inventor of virtual reality exposure therapy. She was one of the first to apply it to the treatment of PTSD in veterans.

To (re)view this webinar: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zN4rHaMEO1M&ab\\_channel=CIMVHRCRSMV](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zN4rHaMEO1M&ab_channel=CIMVHRCRSMV)

The symptoms of PTSD are part of the normal response to trauma. Dr. Rothbaum and her team wanted to determine when the normal response to trauma ends and when a psychopathological response begins that requires diagnosis and treatment. They consider PTSD to be an extinction disorder: fear and anxiety are a normal response to trauma. For most people, this fear fades over time, but for a significant minority, it does not. From the animal literature, we have learned much about the management of this extinction disorder. In humans, we call it exposure therapy.

### Helping to cope

The goal is to help people confront what scares them, but in a therapeutic way, so that it changes. We think in terms of emotional processing theory: when something important happens to us in life, we must process it emotionally. For good emotional processing, you have to activate the memory; you want to bring it up, but you want to put it back in a different way.

> Prolonged exposure to imagination: There is several ways to activate memory:

- 1) Imaginal exposure: we ask people to go back in their minds to the time of the trauma and to out loud, repeatedly.
- 2) In-vivo exposure
- 3) Virtual reality exposure

> Exposure results: Exposure has more evidence of effectiveness for PTSD than any other intervention.

### New approaches

Virtual reality is a computer-generated multimedia environment in which the user feels immersed.

> Virtual reality exposure therapy for veterans

- Imaginary exposure to the most traumatic memories for Iraq/Afghanistan.
- Telling it aloud, in the present tense, repeatedly
- Therapist replicates in VR what the patient describes

In general, they found significant decreases in PTSD.

### Conclusions

- 1) MDMA is not the magic pill: combine MDMA with PE
- 2) There are different types of PTSD
- 3) Treatment will need to be individualized
- 4) We already have excellent treatments
- 5) Not every treatment works for every person
- 6) Stepwise approach (e.g., MDMA)