

Therapy that uses storytelling may be key to fighting trauma from bullying, violence among youth

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Ellen Volpe, assistant professor in the UB School of Nursing. Credit: Douglas Levere

For teenagers from low-income households, trauma from bullying, parental abuse and dating violence often goes untreated, since many families can't afford traditional therapy.

In search of a less expensive, yet effective, form of [therapy](#), a new study led by University at Buffalo behavioral health researcher Ellen Volpe will investigate the effectiveness of narrative exposure therapy (NET) at

treating post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and [substance abuse](#) among adolescents who have experienced multiple traumas.

The pilot study, "The Effectiveness of Narrative Exposure Therapy (NET) for Diverse Populations Experiencing Multiple Traumas," is funded by the Mentored Career Development Award from the National Institutes of Health's Clinical and Translational Science Awards Program.

"Trauma is like a book on a shelf full of memories that a person has no control over in terms of when or how it is experienced," says Volpe, PhD, assistant professor in the UB School of Nursing. "Narrative [exposure therapy](#) helps reestablish the link between memories that were destroyed by trauma, allowing people to have more control over the book."

These links, says Volpe, are what holds together cold, or contextual, memory, such as people, places and events, and hot, or sensory, memory, which includes smells, images, sounds and more. The destruction of this link can cause people to relive a traumatic experience after being triggered by a specific sense, such as a war veteran experiencing PTSD symptoms after hearing exploding fireworks.

NET is a [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) that helps participants reconstruct fragmented, traumatic memories into a clear, personalized story. The brief therapy, which can be completed in 12-16 sessions, helps rebuild the memory by asking participants to recall details such as their age during the experience, the timeline of events, their hopes or fears and notable sounds, smells or other senses.

The therapy has proven effective in treating trauma in foreign countries affected by natural disasters or war. Volpe will work with Buffalo and Rochester community agencies to lead the first investigation testing the

therapy with American adolescents ages 16-21 who are affected by interpersonal violence.

"Across the board, the big difference between recoveries from trauma among adolescents is access to care, whether due to cost, transportation or competing demands," says Volpe. "Often, these kids are victims of multiple forms or episodes of violence, creating a snowball effect on their mental health."

Nearly 70 percent of urban, low-income, minority youth reported undergoing violent trauma in some form, whether it be bullying or abuse, says Volpe. And although not every person who experiences trauma develops PTSD, the experiences place teenagers at risk for depression, substance abuse, high-risk sexual behavior, abuse in future relationships and involvement in the criminal justice system.

If proven effective, Volpe believes NET will provide a cost-effective therapy to offer in low-income, community settings.

Volpe will complete her research under the mentorship of Margarita Dubocovich, PhD, SUNY Distinguished Professor and chair of the Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology in the Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences at UB; Rina Das Eiden, PhD, senior research scientist in the UB Research Institute on Addictions; and Alan Hutson, PhD, professor and chair of the Department of Biostatistics in the UB School of Public Health and Health Professions.

Jennifer Read, PhD, professor in the Department of Psychology in the UB College of Arts and Sciences, is an additional investigator.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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