

Seeking Safety for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder with Comorbid Substance Use Disorder

Q. What is Seeking Safety?

A. Seeking Safety is a manualized, non-trauma-focused cognitive-behavioral intervention for integrated treatment of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and substance abuse (Najavits, 2002). The intervention is comprised of 25 topics, each of which covers a “safe coping skill” relevant to both disorders, with safety as the main treatment goal. In this context, safety refers to a variety of elements, such as eliminating self-destructive behaviors, ending substance use, and reducing suicidality. Seeking Safety has been conducted on an individual and group basis, across a variety of clinical settings and patients.

Q. What is the theoretical model underlying Seeking Safety?

A. Seeking Safety is based on key principles of cognitive behavioral therapy (Najavits, 2002; Beck, Emery, & Greenberg, 2005). It is a time-limited, structured treatment focused on problems in the present, and aims to reduce current symptoms. There is an emphasis on psychoeducation, rehearsing new skills, relapse prevention, and cognitive restructuring. The manual is divided into 25 specific units, addressing different cognitive, behavioral, and interpersonal domains.

Q. Is Seeking Safety recommended as a front-line treatment for PTSD with comorbid substance use disorder (SUD) in the Military Health System (MHS)?

A. No. The 2017 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline (CPG) for the Management of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Stress Disorder states that there is insufficient evidence to recommend for or against Seeking Safety. The CPG gives a “Strong For” strength of recommendation to VA/DoD guideline-recommended treatments for PTSD in the presence of co-occurring SUD, such as prolonged exposure or cognitive processing therapy.

The MHS relies on the VA/DoD CPGs to inform best clinical practices. The CPGs are developed under the purview of clinical experts and are derived through a transparent and systematic approach that includes, but is not limited to, systematic reviews of the literature on a given topic and development of recommendations using a graded system that takes into account the overall quality of the evidence and the magnitude of the net benefit of the recommendation. A further description of this process and CPGs on specific topics can be found on the VA clinical practice guidelines website.

Q. Do other authoritative reviews recommend Seeking Safety as a front-line treatment for PTSD with comorbid SUD?

A. No. Other reviews have not substantiated the use of Seeking Safety as a front-line treatment for PTSD with comorbid SUD.

Several other recognized organizations conduct systematic reviews and evidence syntheses on psychological health topics using similar grading systems as the VA/DoD CPGs. These include the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ) and Cochrane.

- AHRQ: A 2018 systematic review update of psychological and pharmacological treatments for adults with PTSD found that Seeking Safety did not significantly reduce PTSD symptoms compared to usual care, with a low strength of evidence (Forman-Hoffman et al., 2018).
- Cochrane: A 2016 systematic review of psychological therapies for PTSD and comorbid SUD found that 25 sessions of Seeking Safety delivered in a group setting led to reduced drug/alcohol use post-treatment, but not at later follow-ups, and there was no effect on PTSD symptoms. The evidence in the review was judged as mostly low to very low quality (Roberts, Roberts, Jones & Bisson, 2016).

Q. Is there any recent research on Seeking Safety as a treatment for PTSD with comorbid SUD?

A. A June 2019 literature search identified several randomized controlled trials evaluating the effectiveness of Seeking Safety as a treatment for PTSD with comorbid SUD published since the 2016 Cochrane systematic review of psychological therapies for PTSD and comorbid SUD (Roberts et al., 2016). Four trials compared Seeking Safety to other psychotherapy interventions (Hien et al., 2015; Najavits, Krinsley, Waring, Gallagher, & Skidmore, 2018; Norman et al., 2019; Schäfer et al., 2019) and one looked at combining Seeking Safety with a pharmacological treatment (Hien et al., 2015). Importantly, a 2019 trial compared Seeking Safety, which the authors also refer to as present-centered integrated coping skills therapy, with integrated prolonged exposure in 119 veterans with PTSD and alcohol use disorder (Norman et al., 2019). Treatments had comparable decreases in drinking, but there was a significantly greater decrease in PTSD symptoms in the integrated prolonged exposure group.

Q. What conclusions can be drawn about the use of Seeking Safety for PTSD with comorbid SUD in the MHS?

A. The 2017 VA/DoD Clinical Practice Guideline (CPG) for the Management of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Stress Disorder states that there is insufficient evidence to recommend for or against Seeking Safety and recommends the use of VA/DoD guideline-recommended treatments for PTSD for patients with comorbid PTSD and SUD. A recent trial supports this recommendation, finding that an integrated trauma-focused treatment was equally effective as Seeking Safety for drinking outcomes, but more effective for PTSD outcomes than Seeking Safety (Norman et al., 2019).

References

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