

# Innovative therapeutic program helps those living with PTSD

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TARGET provides professionals in various settings with an adaptable tool for treating PTSD. Credit: Pixabay

Millions of people live with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a mental health condition that develops in the aftermath of traumatic events. People with PTSD have difficulty in many aspects of their daily lives due to reacting to everyday stressors with extreme emotional distress or a lack of any emotion, which neither they nor people in their lives understand or know how to cope with.

To help people better understand and recover from PTSD, professor Julian Ford in the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Connecticut School of Medicine created Trauma Affect Regulation: Guide for Education and Therapy (TARGET), a copyrighted educational and therapeutic approach that explains why PTSD develops and how it can be overcome by learning new ways to manage stress reactions.

TARGET explains how PTSD is an extreme version of the normal stress reaction that occurs as a change in the body and brain in order to survive

traumatic events. TARGET also explains how the body and brain can be reset by following seven practical steps that restore the normal ability to cope with stress, and how this can be done without having to relive memories of the traumatic experience.

Until TARGET was developed, there was no evidence-based therapy for PTSD that did not require intensive reliving of trauma memories. TARGET was developed to provide an alternative to this emotionally taxing experience.

"There are a number of psychotherapies for PTSD but most, if not all, of them require the person in therapy to relive traumatic memories," Ford says. "And that's not something all people want to do and it's not the only way to treat PTSD."

Ford first implemented TARGET clinically in a community mental health center and juvenile justice programs in Connecticut, with a very positive response from the participating adults and youth.

Through a series of grants supported by the Department of Justice, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and the National Institute of Mental Health, Ford and his colleagues showed how TARGET could help adults in addiction treatment, mothers with PTSD, girls in or at risk of entering the juvenile justice system, women incarcerated at the York Correctional Institution, and men who were veterans of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

After these studies were published, people from all over the country wanted to use TARGET.

In 2008, UConn licensed a small business established by Ford and his wife, Judy Ford, a marriage and [family therapist](#), to disseminate TARGET. With the guidance of the UConn [Technology Commercialization Services](#), the Fords established that business, Advanced Trauma

Solutions (ATS).

"This developed because TARGET became widely enough known that people wanted it in many parts of the country," Ford says. "There was a need to create a company to do the training, dissemination, and quality control that ATS does."

"It was something that was useful and valuable," Gregory Gallo, director of technology transfer at UConn, says. "It's nice to know this technology is getting out there and helping people."

One of the main advantages of TARGET is that it can easily be adapted to nearly any population and can be done in many settings including schools, colleges, clinics, family service programs, addiction treatment programs, child advocacy centers, homelessness services, and adult and juvenile justice programs.

"It's adaptable because it's a framework for therapy rather than a single method you have to follow in lockstep," Ford says. "It's very flexible."

TARGET consists of seven personalizable steps people in a range of settings and demographics can deploy to reset their trauma-influenced stress reactions.

"It gives them a process for going from being very, very reactive to being much more mindful," Ford says. "TARGET helps people understand and gain control of their stress reactions."

Last year, Julian and Judy Ford retired from the company, but three employees kept it going as [Advanced Trauma Solutions Professionals](#).

"We weren't ready to say goodbye to this work," Katy Reid, Advanced Trauma Solutions Professionals CEO, says.

Reid teamed up with Kami Ochoa, ATS Professionals CXO, a licensed social worker with experience working with chronically homeless populations, and Christine Kopcyk, ATS Professionals COO, who oversees the technology and has experience working with veterans.

"Each of us is deeply passionate about what we do," Reid says.

Reid began working with ATS as an intern in 2013 after using TARGET in her work with youth on juvenile probation.

"I became even more passionate about the model when I saw the back side of the projects. The rigor they applied to everything they were doing," Reid says.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic halting travel, ATS Professionals quickly worked to develop online training protocols that allow people the flexibility to work at their own pace as many people's schedules have become irregular while working from home.

"Thanks to COVID, we really had to put on our thinking hats and get creative about how we deliver these services," Reid says.

TARGET has been translated into Spanish, German, Korean, and Dutch, and is currently being translated into Urdu.

"It really has been translated into languages all over the world and that I think is a reflection of the fact that it is such a straightforward way to understand stress reactions as well as more-severe stress reactions like PTSD," Ford says.

In 2013, Ford and his colleague Jon Wortmann wrote a book called "Hijacked by Your Brain," which translates TARGET's approach into a self-help format.

"TARGET has lent itself to not only being done by professionals, but also something ordinary people can use in their everyday lives," Ford says.

Provided by University of Connecticut

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