

**Final Paper and Treatment Plan**

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**December 14, 2021**

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### **Abstract**

River Tam is a fictional character from the television series *Firefly* and the movie *Serenity*. The series is set about 500 years in the future, after humans leave the Earth and arrive in a new star system. The television series and movie chart the adventures of the ship *Serenity*'s crew, which consists of nine people of which River Tam is a member. During the course of the television series and movie, River displays characteristics that are consistent with a mental health diagnosis of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). River developed her PTSD from numerous surgeries and psychological trauma as a result of her time as a student at a government run facility called the Academy.

By analyzing River's thoughts and behaviors on the television show and movie, it is possible to diagnose River Tam with PTSD. From there, a treatment can be developed using the I CAN START treatment model. Based on the evidence, it is clear that River is in need of a professional diagnosis and treatment from a trained mental health counselor. By using the correct treatment techniques, River can be successfully treated for PTSD and can also learn to control her violent impulses. Such treatment is possible, even though River travels with her brother on a spaceship and is often traveling between planets. River will have the support of her brother during the counseling process and it will be possible for him to play a role in River's treatment via family counseling in which both brother and sister will take part. If both River and the counselor build a strong therapeutic alliance, it will be possible to have a successful treatment outcome for River.

## **Introduction**

River Tam is a character from the television series *Firefly* and the movie *Serenity*. Both the series and the movie are set in the future in a different solar system after humans have left the Earth. The solar system contains dozens of planets and is governed by an interplanetary Alliance and a parliament. River was raised in a wealthy family, but she now lives on a transport spaceship called *Serenity* with her brother and the crew. She and Simon are wanted by the government and are on the run during the entire series and movie. River displays issues that are consistent with several possible mental health diagnoses. After investigating River's case further, it can be determined that River has specific diagnosis of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which developed as a result of her experiences and treatment at a secret government installation known as "The Academy." At the Academy, River was subject to various experiments and brain surgeries, which left her traumatized and suffering from brain damage.

The purpose of this paper is to diagnose River with a specific mental health disorder (PTSD), and develop a treatment plan with which to successfully treat River. With the correct diagnosis and appropriate treatment plan, it will be possible to treat River so that she can lead a normal well-adjusted life. I decided to choose River Tam for my case study because *Firefly/Serenity* are among my favorite TV show and movies and because River Tam displays consistent mental health issues that are in need of intervention and treatment. By writing this paper, I wish to show that although River is a fictional character, she does display a serious mental health issue, which I believe can be successful treated with the correct therapy and interventions.

## **Case Vignette: River Tam**

River Tam is a 17-year-old Caucasian female born into the wealthy and successful Tam family. River has one older brother, Simon, who is in his late twenties and with whom River is extremely close. River is of slight physical build and had no physical disabilities. As River grew up, it became clear that she was a child prodigy who could not only read and write by the age of three, but also was correcting her older brother's spelling and grammar. By the age of 14, River had become bored of school and was taking

graduate level physics classes. At about the age of 15, River's parents, Gabriel and Regan, were made aware of an elite Alliance-sponsored school known as "The Academy." Believing this school could develop River's gifts and abilities, they sent River to this school. Soon after, this school began to experiment on River in order to turn her into a psychic and a trained assassin who would work for the interplanetary alliance.

River Tam was born on the wealthy and prosperous planet of Osiris, one of the central planets of the Alliance. River's family was wealthy and it is indicated that the Tam family is influential on Osiris. The television series and movie provide only limited information about the social construct in which River grew up. River is from an upper-class family with a high socio-economic status and as a child she wanted for nothing. She is extremely close to her brother, Simon and the two used to take part in various social activities and play games together as they grew up. At the age of 15, River was sent to the Academy, a government run school established to train assassins and develop an individual's psychic abilities. Being sent to the Academy is undoubtedly the biggest turning point in River's life. Before the Academy, River appears to be a well-adjusted individual with no violent impulses or tendencies and who enjoys spending time with her family and dancing.

By the time she escapes from the Academy as a 17-year-old, she often has violent delusions and hallucinations, although many of these can be put down to her psychic abilities. River is also prone to violent outbursts and, because of her assassin's training at the Academy, she is potentially dangerous to those around her. River has been known to launch unprovoked attacks on individuals, although these attacks are often as a result of triggers which were implanted into her mind as a result of the training and conditioning she received at the Academy.

When it comes to relationships with her family, she was formally close to her parents up to her escape from the Academy. At that point, their parents disowned River and her brother, Simon as they became fugitives from the government and sought refuge on Serenity. While on Serenity, River has a close peer relationship with the ship's engineer, Kaylee Frye, who is few years older than River. Their

relationship similar to that of teenage friends, including talking about boyfriends and past experiences. Because of her status as a fugitive, River's current peer relationships are rather limited and we only get a glimpse of her childhood friends and acquaintances. During the course of the series and movie, River does not have any relationships with an intimate partner. Much of that aspect of River's life is not covered although it is alluded to in her one conversation with Kaylee that she may have had boyfriends in the past. Based on the limited information we are given, it can be assumed that River is a heterosexual female but has had limited contact with members of the opposite sex.

The health history of the Tam family suggests that, due to their high socio-economic status, the family enjoyed good physical and mental health. River's brother, Simon is a medical doctor who graduated in the top 3% of his class and was already becoming a prominent trauma surgeon when he was involved in the rescue of his sister from the Academy. Later, Simon spends considerable time and effort trying to discover what happened to River at the Academy. He discovers River suffered from significant brain trauma as a result of the surgeries performed on her in order to try and turn her into a psychic. We learn during the TV series that River has had her amygdala stripped or removed, which means she is unable to control her feeling or emotions. This would explain why River often acts out and has occasional violent outbursts.

River's symptoms began to display while she was at the Academy. By the age of 16, River was displaying mental health issues as a result of the experimentation and physiological trauma inflicted on her at the Academy. At the start of the television series, it is clear that River has a serious mental health issue and that she is in need of treatment and therapy. Simon believes that River is suffering from schizophrenia and, to some extent; it would appear that River's does fit the profile of a patient with schizophrenia. Although River does appear to have delusions and hallucinations, these symptoms can be put down to the fact she is a psychic and what she is actually seeing is other people's thoughts and feelings. Therefore, a diagnosis of schizophrenia is not appropriate in River's case.

Based on the evidence and symptoms presented, I will diagnose River with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder. This diagnosis is based on her experiences at the Academy and the fact she keeps experiencing flashbacks of the traumatic events she experienced at the Academy. In addition, River also suffers from a range of symptoms, which are consistent with PTSD. These include persistent avoidance of those things River associates with the Academy such as Serenity's infirmary, irritable behavior and angry outbursts, hypervigilance, and problems with focus and concentration.

Despite River's diagnosis, she is able to participate in a range of activities on board the ship and does like to play games with Kaylee. She is also involved in activities off the ship, which help her become an important member of the crew. However, River does often suffer from flashbacks that render her incapable of normal behavior. On a number of occasions, she has acted in a violent manner, which included slashing the chest of a crewmember with a butcher's knife.

### **DSM-5 Diagnosis**

When diagnosing River Tam, it is clear River conforms to most of the symptoms that are outlined in the DSM-5 manual. "The essential feature of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to one or more traumatic events" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 274) which, in this case, are River's experiences at the Academy. River has directly experienced traumatic events and as a result suffers from recurrent distressing memories and flashbacks, persistent avoidance of places she associates with her distressing memories, such as hospitals, and Serenity's infirmary, a persistent negative emotional state, and irritable behavior often accompanied by angry and violent outbursts.

In some ways, River Tam's behaviors and actions do not conform to a diagnosis of PTSD. River does experience hallucinations and delusions, which could be consistent with a diagnosis of another mental health disorder, such as schizophrenia. When considering mental health diagnosis for River, I also considered the possibility of social anxiety disorder. While River does fit the criteria of a fear of certain social situations, she does not fit any of the other diagnostic criteria for social anxiety disorder. She also

does not fear most social situations, which would make such a diagnosis inappropriate for River. She also does not fit a diagnosis of schizophrenia because, although she has delusions and hallucinations, these can be linked to her capacity as a psychic and not as a result of schizophrenia. In addition, “hallucinations and delusions are actually fairly common in the general population” (Gerson, 2019, p.140) and as a result most of the general population is not diagnosed with schizophrenia.

River does not have disorganized speech, which is also a characteristic of schizophrenia. Based on the evidence from the TV series and movie, there is no evidence of genetic factors in River’s family of schizophrenia or any evidence of any other mental disorders. As a result of these considerations and the evidence presented, that River is suffering from PTSD. Those who develop PTSD are often subject to “trauma-inducing events “ (Kress & Paylo, 2019, p. 218) such as violence and torture, which River has undoubtedly experienced during her time at the Academy.

### **Role of Culture in Making a Diagnosis**

When making a diagnosis for River it is also important to consider any cultural issues that may affect the diagnosis. Culture always plays an important role in the diagnostic process and cultural factors must be taken into consideration when making a diagnosis. In the case of River Tam, she clearly comes from the dominant planet in the solar system and is from an influential family with a high socio-economic status. In these circumstances, River’s diagnosis is going to be influenced by cultural factors. It is important to “recognize the cross-cultural dimensions of trauma” (Bryant-Davis, 2019, p. 401) as is the case in any individual who is diagnosed with a mental disorder. With River, there are few cultural factors that will influence her diagnosis other than she does come from a high socio-economic status and her diagnosis will be influenced by the dominant culture to which she belongs.

Based on River’s behavior and mental state, it is clear River is not conforming to the dominant culture’s expectations and ideas about how an individual should act and behave. It is likely she will be labeled or diagnosed with a mental health disorder. In this case she is diagnosed with PTSD that is based on cultural expectations of how an individual acts and behaves who has received such a diagnosis.



Cultural considerations play a big role in the diagnosis with any individual with a mental health disorder. The diagnosis of mental health disorders is very much based upon western culture and ideals about how people should act and behave. Anyone who does not conform to those ideas is likely to receive a label of mental illness. River Tam is not conforming to the norms of her culture and as a result is diagnosed with PTSD as a result of her experiences at the government run Academy.

### **The historical, social, cultural and political issues in making a diagnosis**

Before applying my diagnosis, there are historical social, cultural, and political issues to consider. From the historical perspective, it must be taken into account the background that River Tam originates. Her story is part of one that is set in the future after humans have left the Earth and populated an entirely new system of planets. Based on the story of the TV show and movie, there has been a blending of human cultures, but western culture is the most dominant of these cultures. The diagnosis I made is based on western cultural ideals of what mental illness and PTSD look like. Other cultures can and do have a different few on mental health issues, which can affect their diagnosis and treatment.

From the political stand point, there are a number of issues that need to be considered when making my diagnosis. River Tam was part of a government-funded project to create assassins that was supported by the interstellar parliament and observed by key members of parliament. River Tam's mental condition is a result of government policies that hoped to create assassins, but in at least one case, resulted in a mentally traumatized young girl. Although the program that River is apart of is secret, by the end of the movie *Serenity*, the entire program has been exposed and made public. Thus, when making a diagnosis, I would have to be mindful of the political fall-out that has occurred and the public's knowledge and reaction to the program.

Socially, River Tam is with a group of people who are supportive of her and her brother. She also has some interaction with others when not on *Serenity*, although because of her condition she is not able to have what is considered normal social interactions. When considering social issues in the diagnosis, it is important to understand the lifestyle that River is living and her background. River is used to an

affluent life with much social interaction, but her trauma and escaping the Academy now limits her social interactions to those she would most likely not have interacted with before. I do not think her current or past social interactions have a great deal of bearing on her diagnosis although her mental condition does have an impact on those around her.

### **Gender, Diagnosis, & PTSD**

The client's gender does affect a diagnosis of PTSD. Female gender puts a person at greater risk of developing PTSD. In general, females are more likely than males to be diagnosed with PTSD, which may correlate to the fact that women are more likely to have a lower socio-economic status than men and are more likely to suffer from domestic violence.

These issues do not apply for River Tam. She comes from a high socio-economic status and has not suffered from any domestic violence. However, River is female and was subjected to experimentation and torture, putting her at high risk of PTSD. As a consequence, River has developed most of the symptoms which are associated with PTSD.

River's gender could affect the collaborative treatment plan. She may be more responsive and accepting of counseling and treatment than males who are often less likely to be diagnosed and less likely to cooperate with treatment. The client's gender often plays a role in how positive the final results of counseling may be for the client.

### **Client Based Needs & Strengths**

River's biggest need is to stabilize her mental condition so she can have full social functioning. By the end of Serenity, River is showing signs of mental stabilization, but she still needs counseling and therapy in order to deal with her PTSD. Another need River has is to be able to cope with her violent impulses so she is not a threat to others.

River has many strengths to help her adjust and overcome her mental health issues. Her biggest strength is her intelligence, which is superior to most other people and which she can harness understand her diagnosis become a willing participant in the treatment process. Another strength is her close

relationship with her brother. Simon, who is a medical doctor and who can help monitor her progress as she goes through the therapeutic process. I have recommended in the treatment plan (Appendix A) that River and Simon undergo family counseling so that both may better understand River's diagnosis and that Simon can help monitor his sister's progress while in counseling.

River's high level of intelligence could be used in the collaborative treatment plan. River can use her intelligence to monitor her own progress and meet her goals while in counseling. Having such a high level of intelligence means that River is more self-aware and able to monitor her own progress in counseling. Simon will also be involved in the counseling process through family therapy. This is another strength that may be used in the collaborative treatment plan to help River.

Another of River's strengths is her ability to endure and survive. River may well be willing to persevere through the counseling process, which will be an important quality to have during counseling. River is also optimistic, which is a good sign for a positive outcome from counseling and therapy. All of these attributes and strengths can be depended upon and incorporated into River's treatment plan.

### **Integrating Client & Counselor Goals**

My main goals of counseling for River Tam is to at first stabilize her condition, then work with her to overcome her difficulties caused by her PTSD. For River, the goals would most likely be the same or similar and, therefore, it is possible to integrate these goals into the treatment plan. Other goals I would want to work on include reducing River's violent impulses and teaching her coping strategies to deal with flashbacks and bad memories from her time at the Academy.

By sharing each other's goals it will be possible to work on both for River's benefit. River wants to overcome her flashbacks and intrusive thoughts and these could easily become shared and integrated goals. River also wants to regain control over her life, which has become dominated by her PTSD symptoms. Goal setting should be done early on in the counseling process so that both River and myself have a clear understanding of what goals she achieved through counseling and what goals we think should

be the focus of counseling in the initial stages. Integrating both River's goals and my goals as the counselor is in the best interests of River and will go towards a positive treatment outcome.

### **Theory to help the Client Achieve her Goals**

When considering a theory or approach with which to help River Tam, I will most likely adopt my theoretical approach of choice, Gestalt Theory. Gestalt therapy is a part of the humanistic school of thought alongside person-centered therapy and existential therapy. "The main goal of Gestalt Therapy is to bring integration" (Halbur & Halbur, 2019, pg. 77). In order for individuals to achieve integration, they must "again awareness" (Halbur & Halbur, 2019, pg. 77), with a heightened awareness the key to achieve full integration. In Gestalt therapy, it is important to focus on the relationship between the counselor and client, and build a strong therapeutic relationship in order to achieve integration.

Gestalt therapy focuses on the present, rather than on past events and, also to an extent focuses on the future and future events. Through gaining awareness, the client can gain the tools necessary to achieve integration. In the case of River Tam, I would focus on the present and future in order to help her achieve self-awareness and integration to accomplish her goals. Gestalt therapy will help River stabilize her condition and achieve the self-awareness she needs to become a fully integrated individual.

### **Evaluating the Client**

When working with River it will be important to check regularly to ensure that the treatment goals are being met. This can be done via verbal communication during the counseling sessions and through the setting of regular homework, which the client can complete, to help indicate she is meeting her treatment goals. Ultimately, it will be up to the client to complete assignments and meet treatment goals that have been decided upon by the counselor and the client.

During the counseling process, River can communicate whether the goals are being achieved and changes can be made as necessary in order to meet the goals set out in the treatment plan. The most

important aspect to achieving the treatment goals is that both counselor and client work together and keep the lines of communication open at all times. This can be done by building a strong therapeutic alliance with River to ensure she can trust me as her counselor. I need to develop a level of trust in River to ensure she completes her treatment goals in a timely manner. By ensuring a strong therapeutic relationship and by having open communications with River, it will be possible to evaluate if her treatment goals are being met to the satisfaction of myself as the counselor and River as the client

### **Conclusions**

River Tam is a fictional character who displays all the characteristics of PTSD. Having investigated the options for various other mental health disorders, such as anxiety and schizophrenia. River fits the diagnosis for one of schizophrenia, but if it is taken into account that her delusions and hallucinations are the result of experiments carried out on River to make her a psychic then a diagnosis of schizophrenia may be discounted. This is because her delusions and hallucinations are the result of her ability to read others and not as the result of schizophrenia.

River's case is somewhat complex in that her symptoms were partly brought on by medical experimentation and also the result of the trauma she endured while she was a student at the Academy. River does not come from a low socio- economic status, minority racial or ethnic status, although she is female and has been exposed to trauma that makes her at high risk for PTSD.

When treating River Tam, the fact must be taken into account that she does live on a ship and is constantly traveling. This may make it difficult for her to receive treatment and therapy in a real life situation. By the end of the film, *Serenity* she is showing some signs of improvement and the end of the movie suggests that the Alliance government is no longer pursuing River and her brother. In this regard, it will make it easier to treat River with the support of her brother to whom she is extremely close. Since her

brother is a trained medical doctor, he can play a key role in her progress during treatment and can also watch her overall physical health.

By putting together a treatment plan, and with both River and her brother's cooperation, it is possible to treat River for the effects of PTSD. Although River is a fictional character, it is possible to chart her deteriorating mental state during the TV series and movie. She shows signs of improvement at the end of the movie, but she has ongoing issues that require counseling and intervention to help stabilize her condition and improve functioning. In addition, River has been known to display violent impulses, which must be addressed if she is to become a functioning member of society. By using prolonged exposure therapy, talk therapy, and encouraging River and her brother to attend family therapy, I believe it would be possible to successfully treat River Tam for PTSD.

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## **Appendix A**

### **I CAN START Treatment Plan: River Tam**

River Tam is a gifted 17-year-old woman, who was recently rescued by her brother from a government facility called the Academy. While at the Academy, River was subject to experimentation and surgery, the results of which have left her mentally traumatized. Using the I CAN START treatment model it will be possible to diagnoses River's mental disorder and provide a treatment plan to aid River's recovery.

#### **I=Individual Counselor**

As an individual, I have to consider my unique issues when it comes to counseling River. In this situation, I have no idea what River went through and experienced while at the Academy. In order to treat River effectively, I must approach her case with an open mind and be prepared to accept some of the extraordinary events she has experienced at face value. Working with River presents challenges and difficulties that I must be willing to overcome if I am to successful treat River for her disorder.

#### **C=Contextual Assessment**

River Tam is a 17-year-old woman, who comes from a wealthy family on the planet Osiris, that forms the planets of the Central Alliance. Growing up, it was clear River was a child prodigy who excelled at anything she put her mind to. She was also athletically gifted. By the age of 14, River had become bored with her regular schoolwork and was enrolled into a physics graduate program. River enjoys dancing and spending time with her family and her brother.

#### **A=Assessment and Diagnosis**

Diagnosis = Posttraumatic Stress Disorder with Derealization 309.81 (F43.10)

#### **N=Necessary Level of Care**

Outpatient, individual counseling, once per week for 1 hour for 12 months. Family Therapy once per week for 1 hour for 12 months.

Consider inpatient care if the client displays evidence of violent behavior.



## **S=Strength Based Lens**

**Self:** River is an extremely intelligent woman who began studying graduate level physics at the age of 14. River survived the psychological abuse, surgeries, and torture at the Academy with her personality and intellect largely intact. River is able to excel in any activity she puts her mind to and is particularly fond of dance.

**Family:** River is very close to her brother, Simon, and the two share a strong bond. River was formally close to her parents but since being rescued from the Academy, River and Simon have been disowned by their parents.

**Community:** River lives on a firefly class spaceship called Serenity with Simon and Serenity's crew. River is supported by the crew, who can play a part in supporting her treatment and return to mental health. Since River and Simon were formally on the run from the Alliance they have few contacts or support outside of Serenity's crew.

## **T=Treatment Approach**

Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PET)

## **A=Aim and Objectives of Treatment**

River will decrease her occurrence of PTSD symptoms by participating in prolonged exposure therapy.

River will experience a decrease in flashbacks from an 8 to a 4 on a 10-point scale.

River will utilize her intelligence to better understand her diagnosis and also to help her self-monitor her progress throughout the counseling process.

River will develop relaxation skills to help overcome her violent behavior. River will learn what her triggers are and will use relaxation techniques to develop coping skills to avoid violent acts.

River will commit no acts of violence in the next 12 months. River will resist any violent impulses she has and will work with the counselor to eliminate violent thoughts and feelings.

River will commit to family therapy with her brother at least once a week. River will work with her brother to try to reconnect with their parents and redevelop family bonds.

**R=Research-Based Interventions**

The counselor will work to develop a therapeutic alliance with River and develop goals and expectations that will aid in the counseling process.

The counselor will help River integrate her memories of the trauma she suffered at the Academy.

The counselor will help River learn techniques to deal with her violent impulses and develop strategies for coping with her violent impulses.

The counselor will teach River relaxation skills in order to help her deal with her stress and trauma.

**T=Therapeutic Support Services**

Referral to a psychiatrist for a consultation.

Weekly individual counseling and participation in a PTSD counseling support group.