

RECOGNIZING POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Article by: Cheryl Sol

Have you noticed that every social event contains some horror story of something that has happened to someone you know. Maybe something traumatic has even happened to you.

Since crime and tragedy are part of our daily lives, it is useful to recognize our trauma responses and learn how to deal with them to reduce the impact

Being exposed to trauma either directly or indirectly can result in a range of symptoms. Some of these clear up without help and are not too distressing or disabling. Others can be extreme, result in anxiety, a fear of doing everyday things like driving, leaving your home or generally interfere with your ability to live a normal life.

Most people who have had a traumatic incident will say that the worst part of it is the intense fear and the sense of helplessness they experience.

However other symptoms can also occur afterwards. They may be immediate or can be delayed by months or even years when something that resembles the traumatic situation – a smell, a reminder or even some vague connection to it may cause the symptoms to manifest.

Natural traumas are called disasters. Human inflicted traumas are called atrocities. Trauma is experienced after both but tends to be worse after some form of violation by another person. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is common in our country because atrocities are common. Rape, hijacking, domestic violence, child abuse and armed robbery are just a few examples of common events that come to mind. We are also traumatized in an insidious way by hearing about these repeatedly.

There are 3 main symptoms that occur in some combination or another:-

1. Re-experiencing symptoms i.e. flashbacks of the trauma. This happens through nightmares, memories intruding while awake, physical sensations. Smells or sights can bring back pictures and feelings as if you were back in the traumatic event.

2. Avoidance symptoms i.e. wanting to avoid going anywhere or being with people who remind you of the trauma. This may also involve avoiding thinking about it or trying not to feel anything about it.

3. Hyperarousal. This involves being over alert. The body becomes over prepared for potential danger. Loud noises e.g. a banging door, someone suddenly coming up behind you result in strong reactions.

These symptoms may range in their seriousness from mild to so distressing that you feel as if you have lost control of your mind.

Your emotions may range from being extreme i.e. rage, anger, fear, guilt and self blame to feeling numb and void of emotion. Others may find you moody. You may feel detached or spaced out or as if you are not in your body. You may avoid people and become depressed. It is common to have sleeping problems.

Underneath all of this is enormous anxiety. Because we like to believe that we can have some degree of control over our lives, it comes as a shock when we don't. It can feel uncomfortable that you didn't act in a way that could have changed the outcome for yourself or someone else. It is never useful to blame yourself, but somehow when we do that, it gives us an illusion that we could have had some control.

Under normal circumstances when you get a fright your body goes into the fight, flight or freeze mode to deal with it. Then the danger passes and your body returns to normal.

With PTSD your body does not return to normal and your brain believe you need to be on the alert for danger 24/7. This leads to heart palpitations, rapid breathing and even panic attacks along with sleep disturbance, disorientation, difficulty concentrating, exhaustion and loss of appetite.

Dealing with PTSD

The traumatic incident may be processed and integrated over a matter of months without receiving any kind of treatment. However this is generally not the case.

PTSD is highly treatable. We all cope with difficult situations differently but as a general rule long term trauma, like growing in an abusive household may take longer to treat than a one off incident in which nobody was harmed. Your response will also depend on what other stressors there are in your life at the time.

Immediately after a trauma it is important to have the support of people who care about you, whether they are friends or family.

It is also useful to find ways to reduce the level of anxiety and physical arousal as well as get a clearer perspective on what happened and your role in it. Therapy can help with this and to work towards a greater a sense of safety and competence to deal with your situation.