

Let's talk about...

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

MENTAL ILLNESS DEMYSTIFIED

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN PEOPLE EXPERIENCE AN EVENT SO TERRIFYING AND SO THREATENING TO THEM PSYCHOLOGICALLY, THAT IT CONTINUES TO HAVE A SERIOUS EFFECT ON THEM LONG AFTER THE THREAT OF ANY PHYSICAL HARM HAS PASSED. PEOPLE WITH THIS EXPERIENCE MAY BE DEALING WITH POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER. PTSD IS CLASSIFIED AS AN ANXIETY DISORDER, THE MOST COMMON OF MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS. IT CAN AFFECT ADULTS AND CHILDREN, AND BECOME SO SEVERE THAT THE PERSON FINDS IT DIFFICULT TO LEAD A NORMAL LIFE. FORTUNATELY, TREATMENTS EXIST TO HELP PEOPLE WITH PTSD BRING THEIR LIVES BACK INTO BALANCE.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is caused by a psychologically traumatic event involving actual or threatened death or serious injury to oneself or others. It first came to public attention with people returning from war, but it can also be the result of a variety of traumatic incidents such as mugging, rape, torture, being kidnapped or held captive, child abuse, car accidents, plane crashes, bombings, or natural disasters such as floods or earthquakes. In some cases, seeing another person harmed or killed, or learning that a family member or close friend was in serious danger resulted in PTSD.

PTSD sufferers re-experience the traumatic event in some way, tend to avoid places, people or other things that remind them of the event, and are exquisitely sensitive to normal life. Although this condition has likely existed since human beings have endured trauma, PTSD has only been recognized as a formal diagnosis since 1980.

In children and teens, PTSD can have significantly negative effects on their social and emotional development, as well as on their ability to learn.

Not every traumatized person develops full-blown or even minor PTSD. Symptoms usually begin within three months of the incident, but occasionally emerge years afterward. Symptoms must last more than a month to be considered PTSD.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Re-experiencing the event—powerful recurrent memories or flashbacks
- Emotional numbing – the person may withdraw from friends and family
- Extreme guilt
- Trouble feeling affectionate
- Becomes irritable, more aggressive, or even violent
- Avoid situations that remind them of the event
- Insomnia, difficulty concentrating and finishing tasks

Post traumatic stress disorder is often accompanied by depression, substance abuse, or one or more of the other anxiety disorders. As well, dizziness, chest pain, stomach complaints, and immune system problems may be linked to PTSD.

TREATMENT

It is helpful for people suffering from PTSD to learn what they can about this illness: that is caused by extraordinary stress rather than weakness, how it is treated, and what to expect in treatment. Education can increase the likelihood that any inaccurate ideas people may have about this illness are dispelled, and any shame they may feel about it is minimized.

Cognitive-behavioural therapy and group therapy are generally used to treat PTSD. This type of therapy is often performed by therapists experienced in a particular type of trauma such as rape counsellors. Exposure therapy in which the person re-lives the experience under controlled conditions in order to work through the trauma, can also be beneficial.

Medication can be used to treat the depression and anxiety often felt by people with PTSD, and to help them re-establish regular sleep patterns.

Untreated PTSD can have devastating, far-reaching consequences for sufferers' functioning and relationships, their families, and for society. If you or someone you know may be suffering from a trauma of some sort then be sure to get help. For more information, contact your EFAP or a local office of the Canadian Mental Health Association.

RECOMMENDED READING: *TRAUMA AND RECOVERY*, JUDITH HERMAN, M.D., PUBLISHED BY PERSEUS BOOKS GROUP



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