

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is defined by the National Institute of Mental Health as “an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened. Traumatic events that may trigger PTSD include violent personal assaults, natural or human-caused disasters, accidents, or military combat.” Signs of PTSD include flashbacks and memories of the painful or traumatic events that the victims’ experienced, and often leads to emotional and psychological numbness and erratic behavior patterns.

Introduction

Though I do not personally know anyone afflicted by Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, I chose to research and write about the topic out of Academic interest, which was piqued specifically by different television and news reports regarding recent veterans of the War in Iraq, and the complications and horror of combat and its effect on the soldiers involved. I thought it would be an interesting focus, and would allow me to learn more about PTSD and the different groups and individuals affected as a whole, while also finding out more about my specific interest as well. I know of other groups besides veterans who are afflicted by PTSD, such as victims of domestic violence, rape, or other life traumas, but I desired to gain a more in-depth understanding about the complications of PTSD.

Section 1: Background and Problem Statement

- **Web site #1 Name:** Healthy People 2010 did not have any direct or specific information about Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, so I used the National Institute for Mental Health as my first source.
- **Web address:** <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/complete-index.shtml#pub1>
- **Background Information:**
 - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is an anxiety disorder that can affect anyone, regardless of age or any other defining factor, and occurs after any significantly traumatizing event. One of the most serious effects of the disease is that those afflicted will continue to feel scared or anxious in everyday life, and the natural “flight or fight” response to danger or stress is altered or damaged. This change in mental state can affect a person’s daily life and responses to everyday stressors.

- **Web site #2 Name:** **National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder**
- **Web address:** <http://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/pages/what-is-ptsd.asp>
- **Background Information:**
 - PTSD can be triggered by a variety of traumatic experiences, including but not limited to:
 - Combat/Military Experience
 - Sexual/Physical Abuse or Assault
 - Serious Accidents ex. Car crashes
 - Natural Disasters

After experiencing one of these events, the scared or angry feelings the victims felt during the trauma may carry over to everyday life, and affect their response to everyday activities or stress, possibly worsening over time.

- **Web site #3 Name:** **Mental Health America**
- **Web address:** <http://www.nmha.org/go/ptsd>
- **Background Information:**

- PTSD does not only affect those directly involved in a traumatic experience, it also affects other involved parties. For instance, PTSD has been known to affect emergency responders who help trauma victims through events, as well as family or friends who witness the violent or traumatic death of a loved one. The disorder also affects children who are neglected or abused in various ways throughout the impressionable years of their childhood, also causing the issue of repressed memories and other psychological or emotional problems.

Section 2: Research

Web site #1 Name: Mental Help.Net

- **Web address:** http://www.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=news&id=130029&cn=109
- **Summary of the research:**
 - According to the study found on the MentalHelp.Net Web site, men and women are more vulnerable to PTSD at different times in their lives. “Women are most vulnerable to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) between ages 51 and 55, while men are more prone to the condition from ages 41 to 45, a new study finds”. One researcher stated "People now live for an increased number of years compared to that of previous generations, and as a result individuals have more years in which they can be affected by the negative consequences that can follow traumatic experiences. It is therefore important to pay attention to the risk of PTSD in relation to different stages in the lifespan."
- **Web site #2 Name: British Journal of Psychiatry**
- **Web address:** <http://bjp.rcpsych.org/cgi/content/full/180/4/363>
- **Summary of the research:**
 - The British Journal of Psychiatry conducted a study of car accident survivors, and followed their behavior patterns in the 6 months following the accidents. The researchers assessed the measures of dissociation in all subjects as a determinate for PTSD symptoms. Dissociation, according to MentalHealthAmerica (<http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/go/dissociation>) is “a mental process that causes a lack of connection in a person’s thoughts, memory and sense of identity”. The sensation of association is often described as a person feeling like they are watching themselves in a movie, not fully in control of their body, etc. According to the researchers in this study, dissociative tendencies and memory fragmentation predicted PTSD symptoms. At the conclusion of the study, researchers found that 32% of out-patient accident survivors who met the dissociation criteria in the initial assessment following the accident, and 77% of those who met the criteria after a 4 week assessment all met the PTSD criteria after 6 months.
- **Web site #3 Name: Science Daily**
- **Web address:** <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2004/04/040409094817.htm>
- **Summary of the research:**
 - In a study conducted among 43 families at New York University Medical Center and Children’s Medical Center in Dallas, doctors studied the effects of cardiac surgery and extended ICU stays in school age children to determine if the patients developed PTSD following their surgery and treatment. According to the research, no children had experienced any PTSD symptoms of any kind, but after the surgery “five (12%) of the children met diagnostic criteria for PTSD, and five (12%) exhibited some of the characteristics of PTSD, including disorganized behavior, nightmares, sleep disorders, and concentration problems”. According to Michael Artman, M.D., Director of Pediatric Cardiology at New York University School of Medicine, "Even though this was a relatively small sample, it is impressive that roughly 1 in 10 children develop full blown post-traumatic stress disorder after undergoing heart surgery. The only factor we found that seemed to correlate with PTSD was a stay of more than 48 hours in the ICU, which is really not

very long. Presently, we don't know what factors in the ICU might be contributing, but our new findings clearly demonstrate the need for future research."

Section 3: Statistics

- **Web site #1 Name: Cincinnati Children's**
- **Web address: <http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/health/info/mental/diagnose/ptsd.htm>**
- **Summary of the statistics:**
 - Though the Web site states that traumatic experiences are not common for most American children or Adults, they report that approximately 3 million children are diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder each year. The site goes on to state that though no studies have examined the general public for incidences of PTSD in children or adults, that it is estimated to be as high as 40 % in reportedly violent neighborhoods.
- **Web site #2 Name: National Institute for Mental Health**
- **Web address: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/the-numbers-count-mental-disorders-in-america/index.shtml#PTSD>**
- **Summary of the statistics:**
 - According to the National Institute for Mental Health, approximately 7.7 million Americans age 18 and older (3.5% of age group), have Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Also, though PTSD can occur at any age, 23 is the median age of onset for PTSD symptoms. More specifically, the NIMH reported that 19 % of Vietnam Veterans experienced PTSD following their return from combat. The fact that about 1/5 of soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War experienced PTSD following their experiences indicates the danger of this condition for any soldier.
- **Web site #3: The National Center for Victims of Crime**
- **Web address: <http://www.ncvc.org/ncvc/main.aspx?dbName=DocumentViewer&DocumentID=32366>**
- **Summary of the statistics:**
 - According to the National Center for Victims of Crime "In 2006, victims age 12 or older experienced 272,350 rapes or sexual assaults". A startling statistic on its own, it is compounded by the fact that one third of all rape or sexual assault victims experience Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in their lifetime following their attacks, and furthermore 11% of those victims are still currently suffering from the disorder. These statistics indicate the harsh effects that specific traumas have on victims, and the related occurrence of PTSD following the events.

Section 4: Consumer Information

- **Web site #1 Name: Mayo Clinic.com**
- **Web address: <http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/post-traumatic-stress-disorder/DS00246/DSECTION=symptoms>**
- **Summary of the information:**
 - As it is a psychological issue that affects people in various ways, it is important to understand as many symptoms and indicators of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as possible. It is also important to recognize that the severity of the disorder can vary based on the individual affected (age, gender, etc.) and the level of trauma experienced (minor car accident vs. terrorist attack). According to the Mayo Clinic.com "Post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms are commonly grouped into three types: intrusive memories, avoidance and numbing, and increased anxiety or emotional arousal (hyperarousal)". Intrusive memories include flashbacks of the event, and or

dreams about the trauma. Symptoms of avoidance and numbing include difficulty maintaining close relationships, loss of joy in formerly enjoyable activities, and hopelessness; signs that are coincidentally associated with a person contemplating suicide. Also, the problem of hyperarousal may cause irritability or anger, guilt, increased anxiety and self destructive tendencies in PTSD victims, leading to other social or emotional issues. I found the details of these symptoms interesting because I was not aware of how serious and various the effects of PTSD were.

- **Web site #2 Name: Medpage Today**
- **Web address: <http://www.medpagetoday.com/PublicHealthPolicy/MilitaryMedicine/22032>**
- **Summary of the information:**
 - According to an article on Medpage Today, the existence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in elderly veterans increases their risk of dementia. In fact, the risk of dementia for veterans who had previously experienced PTSD was double that of veterans who had no history of the disorder. I found this statistic incredibly shocking, as veterans with a history PTSD are dramatically more vulnerable to future dementia. Though researchers indicated that the study was still in its early stages, they plan to continue their research with returning Afghanistan and Iraq Veterans.

- **Web site #3 Name: Family Doctor.org**
- **Web address: <http://familydoctor.org/online/famdocen/home/common/mentalhealth/anxiety/449.html>**
- **Summary of the information:**
 - Prior to researching this topic more in-depth, I associated Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder with more serious issues such as military combat/experience, rape and sexual assault, and terrorist attacks. However, I was surprised to find out that even car accidents of any caliber, minor or serious, can trigger symptoms of PTSD. According to Family Doctor.org, more than 6 million car accidents occur every year in the United States. And though not all will result in their victims developing PTSD, research has shown that some car accident survivors will experience symptoms of the disorder. They will even have symptoms specific to their experience, such as fear or discomfort with driving motor vehicles following the accident, as well as attending medical appointments on their own. I had no idea that PTSD could be so prevalent, or brought on by events like motor vehicle accidents. And the fact that car accidents are such a regular occurrence in America only increases the probability of people who may experience PTSD.

Section 5: Solutions to the Problem (or Issue)

- **Web site #1 Name: Food and Drug Administration**
- **Web address: www.fda.gov/ohrms/dockets/ac/99/backgrd/3556q1.doc**
- **Summary of the information:**
 - In a proposal to vote on reviewing and certifying Zoloft as a prescription drug to treat Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, the FDA indicated that Zoloft had the potential to possibly treat PTSD because the symptoms are similar to those of depression, for which Zoloft is currently legally prescribed. In the article, the FDA states that there no drugs approved for treating PTSD in the United States; a fact which surprised me greatly considering the amount of prescription medication available for sufferers of depression and other conditions with similar symptoms to PTSD. However, the fact that the FDA is considering expanding the use of Zoloft to treat PTSD may change that fact, and make prescription treatment available for PTSD sufferers. Since the publication of the article, I found that the FDA has approved two drugs to treat PTSD including Zoloft.

- **Web site #2 Name:** WebMD
- **Web address:** <http://www.webmd.com/mental-health/post-traumatic-stress-disorder>
- **Summary of the information:**
 - In reference to the issue raised by findings on Web site #1, mainly the fact that until recently there were prescription medications approved for treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress disorder, WebMD revealed that PTSD is a unique disorder in that it is one of few psychological problems that are caused by an outside source rather than an internal one specific to an individual's chemical imbalance or specific personal issues. Because the causes of PTSD can be so various, and come from an outside event, it may be that no prescription was previously approved to treat PTSD victims. WebMD suggests that grief counseling following the accident, as well as cognitive psychotherapy with psychiatric professionals can help treat PTSD. Psychotherapy as well as medication provides the best results, often helping victims reduce, and overtime, overcome any flashbacks or other symptoms of PTSD.

- **Web site #3 Name:** National Suicide Prevention Hotline
- **Web address:** <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org/Veterans/Default.aspx>
- **Summary of the information:**
 - As I initially picked this topic based on my interest in the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder linked with Veterans, I was very interested to find that the Veteran's Health Administration has directly partnered with the National Suicide Prevention Hotline to provide a call center specifically designed for Veterans. Also partnered with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the VHA set up a hotline with counselors specifically trained to aid veterans suffering from mental disorders including PTSD.

Conclusions

Before I did my research for this topic, I thought I had a decent understanding of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as well as the events that are linked with the issue. After completing this project, I learned more about the topic I had previous knowledge about, while also attaining much more information about the various and complicated effects of PTSD. I was particularly surprised at how prevalent PTSD could be in seemingly everyday occurrences, like car accidents. I did not know that such events could result in the same risk of developing and experiencing PTSD as more serious issues, like combat or sexual assault. I was also surprised at some of the statistics I encountered along the way, especially those involving veterans, who seem to be the most at-risk group among those commonly affected by PTSD. I was pleased to find that the medical community and Veterans Affairs are taking the issue of PTSD more seriously I both the public and military sectors by developing and prescribing new medications, creating more studies, and instituting more accessible therapies and treatments for those affected. Perhaps the most important thing I learned is that PTSD can occur in almost anyone, regardless of any defining statistic or aspect, even me, and the knowledge on how to recognize and help those affected was extremely helpful and interesting.

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