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Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

by Chris Vallier, L.C.S.W., J.D.

Ernesto just returned from Afghanistan where he witnessed an improvised explosive device (IED) destroy a Humvee in his convoy, killing his best friend. Now that he's back home, he's no longer the easy-going guy he once was. He has angry outbursts at the slightest provocation and uses illegal drugs to repress his wartime memories.

When Liz was seven years old, her stepfather sexually abused her. Now in her thirties, she wants to put the past behind her but can't. She's unable to establish intimate relationships and has frequent nightmares about her abuse.

It may not appear that Ernesto's wartime experience has much in common with Liz's sexual abuse, but it does. As a result of the trauma they've each experienced, they both now suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD.

What Is PTSD?

PTSD is an anxiety disorder that affects individuals who've experienced firsthand (or witnessed) intensely traumatic events where there was a perceived or real threat of death. In addition to sexual abuse and war, PTSD can also occur as a result of other stressors, including: violent personal attacks such as assault or domestic violence; rape; mugging; car, plane or train accidents; prison stays; natural disasters, such as hurricanes, tornadoes or earthquakes; and terrorist attacks.

Although most experts agree that 1 in 10 children and adults has PTSD, not everyone who experiences a traumatic event will develop the condition. Experts are uncertain as to why some people suffer from PTSD while others, who've experienced similar trauma, do not.

How Do You Know If You Have PTSD?

Symptoms of PTSD can occur months or even years after a traumatic event and typically fall into three categories:

1. **Avoidance/Withdrawal.** You may feel emotionally numb, detached, or emotionally "checked out" and wish to avoid situations that might trigger painful emotions or remind you of the trauma. As a result, you may have a difficult time experiencing and expressing emotions or maintaining intimate relationships. You might withdraw from friends, family and activities you once enjoyed. You may also have difficulty remembering all, or parts of, the traumatic event.

Liz both craves and fears intimacy with a significant other and, as a result, has had a series of one-night stands. This allows her to feel connected physically, but means she avoids experiencing, and ultimately coming to terms with, the painful feelings associated with her trauma.

2. **Reliving the Experience.** You have frequent and vivid memories of the traumatic event. You have recurring nightmares, flashbacks or hallucinations that are triggered by certain images, smells and sounds.
3. **Arousal.** You may experience anxiety, inability to concentrate, agitation, difficulty falling asleep, or increased irritability or anger outbursts. You may have heightened awareness (hypervigilance) or an exaggerated response when startled

Ernesto rarely leaves the house and refuses to let his wife, Maria, go anywhere alone. He constantly wants to protect her (as he feels he failed to do with his best friend) and is always in a heightened state of alert. His behavior has meant increased isolation for the couple, as Maria gives in to his fears.

People with PTSD may also experience:

Substance or alcohol abuse; panic attacks; survivor guilt; difficulty finding or keeping a job; physical symptoms such as headaches, migraines, breathing irregularities or tightness in the chest; increased risk of depression and suicidal thoughts.

Coping with PTSD

Although there is no “one size fits all” treatment for PTSD, three successful options are:

Professional help: Psychotherapy can help you to reinterpret how you react to your experiences. Discovering what makes you afraid or upset is the first step in finding the tools to replace old, harmful thoughts and feelings with new ones that more accurately reflect the current situation.

Medication can also be helpful in treating PTSD symptoms. Medicines that act on the nervous system can help reduce anxiety and panic attacks. Antidepressants, including selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), can be effective in treating depressive symptoms. Other anti-anxiety and sleep medicines may also be helpful in dealing with PTSD-related insomnia..

Support groups: Communicating and sharing traumatic experiences with others who’ve had similar experiences helps you process and work through feelings of anger, guilt and fear. Symptoms may never completely disappear, but sharing thoughts and feelings in a structured, safe environment helps manage them while building self-confidence and trust.

Self care: Those with PTSD are often have very little patience for themselves or their symptoms. But healing takes time and energy. In order to recover, self care is essential.

Suggested self-care activities include taking a few minutes out of each day to relax, rest, listen to music, paint, write in a journal, or read. Eating healthy, exercising, and getting enough sleep are also important.

PTSD is a serious condition. If you recognize the symptoms in yourself or a loved one, seek treatment right away.

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