

Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Opinion

What does Trauma mean?

Trauma is the Greek word (Τραύμα) for to pierce, or to wound. It is a severe emotional shock caused by an extremely upsetting experience that affects the physiology of the body and the central nervous system.

Why do people get traumatized?

In order to successfully negotiate a traumatic event, we must respond in one of two ways: either resist and overcome the threat ('Fight'), or avoid and get away from the threat ('Flight').

Furthermore, if we are unable to exercise either of these two options, we enter a third state, common to all animals, we "Freeze". Unlike our animal friends, this frozen state of heightened autonomic arousal may become chronic over time. Animals in the wild literally "shake off" the threat, but we humans, with our complex brains, get stuck in frozen patterns of distress.

In PTSD and Panic Disorder, for example, we see automatic and persistent symptoms of hyper vigilance, fatigue, anxiety, sleep disturbance, social withdrawal, addictive behaviour, depression, and numbing.

What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

In our everyday lives, any of us can have an experience that is overwhelming, frightening, and beyond our control. We could find ourselves in a car crash, the victim of an assault, or see an accident. Police, fire brigade or ambulance workers are more likely to have such experiences – they often have to deal with horrifying scenes. Soldiers may be shot or blown up, and see friend skilled or injured.

Most people, in time, get over experiences like this without needing help. In some people, though, traumatic experiences set off a reaction that can last for many months or years.

This is called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD for short.

How does PTSD start?

PTSD can start after any traumatic event. A traumatic event is one where we can see that we are in danger, our life is threatened, or where we see other people dying or being injured.

Some typical traumatic events would be:

1. Serious road accidents
2. Military combat
3. Violent personal assault (sexual assault, physical attack, abuse, robbery, mugging)
4. Being taken hostage
5. Terrorist attack
6. Being a prisoner-of-war
7. Natural or man-made disasters
8. Being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness.

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9. Even hearing about the unexpected injury or violent death of a family member or close friend can start PTSD.

What are the symptoms of PTSD?

There are four main types of PTSD symptoms. A diagnosis of PTSD requires the presence of all categories of symptomatic responses:

Re-experiencing the trauma: Flashbacks, nightmares, intrusive memories and exaggerated emotional and physical reactions, to triggers that remind the person of the trauma

Emotional numbing: Feeling detached, lack of emotions (especially positive ones), loss of interest in activities.

Avoidance: Avoiding activities, people, or places that remind the person of the trauma.

Increased arousal: difficulty sleeping and concentrating, irritability, hyper vigilance (being on guard), and exaggerated startle response.

How PTSD is commonly treated?

If symptoms persist for longer than four weeks, a diagnosis of PTSD is made.

Symptoms of PTSD are commonly treated by Psychotherapy.

Because PTSD has so strongly affected the brain itself, treatment often takes longer and progresses more slowly than with other types of anxiety disorders, and is most effective with a specialist in trauma recovery.

It is most important to feel comfortable and safe with the therapist, so there is no additional fear or anxiety about the treatment itself.

Psychotherapy may include relaxation techniques deep breathing, muscle relaxation, positive imagery, meditation, etc.

Conclusion

Working with clients who have experienced a traumatic event, the sooner we are able to process what the client is experiencing, the more favourable the outcome will be.

On average however, clients who have developed PTSD following a traumatic event, sometimes require only 6 to 8 sessions. However, in some severe cases, clients might need more sessions to process their experiences and, depending on the extent of their symptoms, it may be more effective to see the therapist as often as required.

During the London terrorist attacks on 07/07/2005, Vasilios witnessed the devastation caused by the bombing in Tavistock Square. He volunteered his services to the emergency services where he was able to offer his expertise in setting up an emotional first aid support

team for the victims of the Tavistock Square and Russell Square underground station attacks.

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Conflicts of interest

Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.