

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

War broke out in Khalid's home country. Government forces executed his brother because he refused to fight in the war. Khalid also refused to fight in the war and feared that he would also be executed. He was interrogated by security forces on a number of occasions, during which time he experienced torture. Accordingly, Khalid decided to flee his country with his pregnant wife and 9-year-old daughter. He described this experience as terrifying as he feared for his life and the lives of his family members if they were caught.

Khalid and his family eventually arrived in Australia. He is happy that he and his family have found peace and opportunity here.

Although he is far away from the danger, Khalid still feels nervous. He jumps whenever he hears a loud sudden noise. Khalid also gets nightmares usually of government forces capturing him or killing his brother. He loses his temper very quickly, which has impacted on his family life. Khalid avoids going out as he cannot stand crowds of people and prefers that people do not visit him. This has isolated him from his community. Khalid does not enjoy his hobbies and interests anymore. He does not understand why he feels this way.

Khalid in the example above is displaying symptoms or signs of what is referred to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD can develop in a person after they have been exposed to an extremely traumatic event.

Such traumatic events include:

- War
- Torture
- Rape
- Childhood physical and sexual assault
- Terrorism
- Natural disaster (e.g. a flood)
- Major car accident
- Being diagnosed with a potentially fatal illness e.g. cancer
- Finding the body of someone who has committed suicide or been murdered

Symptoms

The symptoms that commonly occur in people suffering from PTSD have been divided into three categories: Intrusions, Physical Arousal, and Avoidance.

The Intrusive Symptoms include:

- Distressing thoughts or images
- Nightmares about the event
- Feeling or acting as if the traumatic event were recurring
- Intense psychological distress when exposed to something that triggers memories of the traumatic event
- Physical symptoms such as sweating, muscle tension and rapid heartbeat when exposed to things that trigger memories of the traumatic event

The Physical Arousal Symptoms include:

- Sleep disturbance
- Irritability or anger
- Impaired concentration
- Being always on the alert for signs of danger
- Being easily startled (overreact to something such as a noise)

The Avoidance Symptoms include:

- Trying to avoid thinking or talking about the trauma, as well as any feelings associated with the trauma
- PTSD sufferers may resort to alcohol or illicit drugs to block out unwanted memories & feelings
- Avoiding people, places and activities that trigger memories of the traumatic event
- Not remembering an important part of the traumatic event
- Losing interest in, and enjoyment of e.g. leisure activities, study, work or stop participating in such activities altogether
- Feeling detached from other people
- Being unable to feel joy or have loving feelings
- Not be able to see a future for themselves, they don't expect to get married, have a family, live a long time

Treatment of PTSD

Medication

Anti-depressants, anxiety medication and/or sleeping medications may assist a person to cope with the symptoms whilst learning to gain some control over their behaviour, thoughts and feelings again. Often these symptoms need to be treated to provide symptom relief so a person can participate effectively in other treatment – i.e. group therapy.

Psychological Treatment

Therapists treating PTSD aim to provide a safe and trusting environment in which the person can deal safely with the impact of the event/s.

References

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