

Secondary Traumatization: Effects on Family



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Background & Overview

- Those with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
 - Considerable social & emotional difficulties
 - Difficulties affect family
 - Expected to provide all or most of support
 - Witness variety of negative behaviors & emotions

Background & Overview

- How behaviors & emotions affect relationships
 - Low frustration threshold
 - Lack of patience with children
 - Inability to carry on family role
 - Verbal & physical aggression



Research has shown that close, long-term contact with an emotionally disturbed person can cause chronic stress





Family members &/or SO's of those with PTSD can develop *secondary traumatization*

Secondary Traumatization

- Natural emotional reaction to trauma of SO
- Stress caused by:
 - providing help
 - offering emotional support to traumatized person
- Almost identical to PTSD – except indirect exposure to trauma through close contact with person with PTSD

Secondary Traumatization & Problems in Relationships

- Severe & pervasive negative effects on:
 - Marital adjustment
 - General family functioning
 - Mental health of partners
- Result in such problems as:
 - Compromised parenting
 - Family violence
 - Divorce
 - Sexual problems
 - Aggression
 - Caregiver burden



Recognizing Secondary Traumatization

- Indicators
 - Psychological
 - Emotional
 - Physical
- Symptoms often mirror those of person with PTSD

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8

Psychological Indicators

- Self-isolation
- Cynicism
- Loss of interest
- Changes in self perception and that of others
- Prolonged grief
- Problems with concentration

Emotional Indicators

- Inappropriate anger/irritability
- Sadness/depression
- Generalized anxiety/worry
- Mood swings
- Emotional exhaustion



Physical Indicators

- Headaches
- Indigestion
- Susceptibility to infections
- Increased use of alcohol, drugs, or tobacco
- Lethargy/chronic fatigue
- Insomnia



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11

Anger & Secondary Traumatization

- Common response to caregiving for person with PTSD
- Natural survival response - help one cope
- Full activation - problems
- 3 factors that lead to "full activation":
 - Arousal
 - Behavior
 - Thoughts/beliefs
- Need outlet for processing strong anger feelings

Anger - Reasons



- Broadly directed
- Person with PTSD - not the same
- Frustration - not understanding their experiences

Depression & Secondary Traumatization

- May feel sorry for person's experiences/suffering
- Sadness that person:
 - May no longer want to do activities together
 - Not participate in family events, etc.

Sleep & Secondary Traumatization

- Why SO's/Family members have sleep problems:
 - "On alert"
 - Worry or have negative thoughts
 - Use drugs or alcohol
 - Bad dreams or nightmares
 - May have medical problems

Avoidance & Secondary Traumatization

- Natural to avoid thinking or feeling about trauma
- Types of avoidance:
 - Emotional - hold back or disregard
 - Thoughts – denial or negativity
 - Behavioral
 - Reminders/triggers (i.e. isolation, drinking or drugs)
 - “Walk on eggshells”
 - Physical – people, places, things, conversations, etc.



Consequences of Avoidance

- “Just try not to think about it”
 - May worsen symptoms
 - Short-term solution to long-term problem
 - Problematic if becomes primary way of coping
- Not all avoidance is bad
 - Temporary distraction – can focus thoughts on intended purpose (i.e. school or work)

Recognition of Warning Signs

- Food, drug or alcohol abuse
- Anger
- Over-working
- Depression
- Exhaustion
- Sleep disturbance
- Frequent somatic complaints
- Hopelessness
- Inability to balance objectivity & empathy
- Low self-esteem


<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1PlkxDeXt8>

Positive & Negative Coping Strategies

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positive• Expression of feelings• Emotional support• Humor• Good physical health• Hobbies• Seeks peer support• Spiritual activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Negative• Alcohol• Drugs• Disengagement• Denial
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Prevention – What Can You Do

- Education & increasing awareness
- Early identification & recognition
- Stringent observation for early warning signs



Interventions

- Specifically aimed at:
 - Management of stress, anxiety & pervasive negative attitudes
 - Awareness of potential for detrimental personal consequences:
 - Detachment from person with PTSD
 - Decreased empathy
 - Lack of interaction with family & peers

Treatment Options

- Understanding PTSD
 - Impact on person with PTSD
 - Impact on family
- Family psychoeducation
 - Teach coping strategies
 - Educate about effects of PTSD
- Support groups for both caregiver & person with PTSD
- Individual treatment – for either or both
- Couple or family therapy
