

MODULE 3C

Activity #4 Handout

Group #8: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Fact Sheet)

What is Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

PTSD is a disturbance of the normal stress response to a severe and often life-threatening event. This response persists well beyond the expected time and causes significant problems in daily life. Sometimes the PTSD can be so intense that a person has great difficulties at home, work or school and may require a brief period of time in hospital to help recover.

Everyone experiences substantial symptoms of emotional distress when faced with a severe and sometimes life-threatening stressor (such as: being in an automobile accident, being raped, witnessing a murder or an event where people die, experiencing an earthquake, etc.). These symptoms include: anxiety, fear, trouble sleeping, bad dreams, recurring thoughts or images of the event, irritability, etc. These symptoms are normal; everyone who lives through such an experience has them. This is not PTSD. It is called an Acute Stress Reaction (ASR) and it gradually goes away over a few months if the person is in a safe environment and receives support from his/her family and friends.

PTSD is the continuation of the ASR for many months or even years, and also includes other symptoms such as: re-experiencing the event, persistent high emotional intensity, feeling of “being on edge”, nightmares, depressed mood and even suicidal thoughts. Fortunately, the majority of people who experience severe and sometimes life-threatening events do not develop PTSD – in fact, most don’t.

Recently it has become popular to use the word “trauma” to describe negative but common life events such as failing an exam, going through a difficult breakup, or leaving home to go to college. The use of the word “trauma” has also been used to indicate feeling hurt, angry or upset if someone challenges a person’s political, religious or other beliefs. These are not trauma. They may lead to negative emotions but do not cause PTSD. We need to be clear in our language.

What Causes PTSD?

Unlike all other mental illnesses, PTSD is ALWAYS caused by a terrible event that occurs in a person’s life. However, most people who experience such events do not develop PTSD. Recently scientists have discovered that genes also play an important role in determining who will and who will not develop PTSD.

How can PTSD be Treated?

PTSD is usually diagnosed if severe symptoms that negatively impact daily life have persisted for months after the event. A number of psychological treatments can be prescribed and can be helpful for many people. Some people with PTSD will also benefit from taking one of a number of different medications. We also know that some things we do for people after they experience a traumatic event can increase the risk that they will get PTSD. These things include forcing people to talk about the event after they have experienced it in the mistaken belief that forcing them to talk about it will make it better for them.

Support from family members, friends and the wider community are helpful for people who have PTSD. As with all mental disorders, taking care of your physical health by getting enough exercise, eating healthy foods, limiting use of alcohol, avoiding drugs and being with people who care for you can provide additional benefit to prescribed treatments.

Group #8: Understanding Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Reporting Page)

What is PTSD?

How common is PTSD?

Describe some of the symptoms of PTSD:

What combination of factors is thought to cause PTSD?

What type of treatment is available for people with PTSD?

What other kinds of support can help people with PTSD recover?