

The SOLUTION source

Thunder Bay Counselling Newsletter
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For You & Your Family

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OUR SPRING 2017 NEWSLETTER WILL FOCUS ON PTSD AND THE WORKPLACE.

PTSD stands for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

According to the Canadian Mental Health PTSD can be described as:

"Frightening situations happen to everyone at some point. People can react in many different ways: they might feel nervous, have a hard time sleeping well, or go over the details of the situation in their mind. These thoughts or experiences are a normal reaction. They usually decrease over time and the people involved can go back to their daily lives.

Post-traumatic stress disorder, on the other hand, lasts much longer and can seriously disrupt a person's life".

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About PTSD

The PTSD Association of Canada states the following:

TRIGGERS

The trauma can be triggered by large-scale ordeals, like terrorism attacks or devastating natural disasters, or highly personal events like a car accident, losing a job or business, divorce, failing to achieve a goal, loss of a loved one, seeing or hearing of a death, personal injury, childhood trauma or any other life-altering experience.

SYMPTOMS

People who suffer from PTSD exhibit a variety of symptoms. These can include a deep sense of helplessness, problems at home or work, abnormal fear, feelings of devastation, flashbacks from the event, a feeling of numbness, aversion to social contact, or avoidance of situations that might trigger memories of the event. Some physical responses may include depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, panic attacks, irritability, anger outbursts, difficulty with concentration or memory, feelings of vulnerability, fear of normal every-day activities, or feeling overwhelmed by the smallest of tasks.

LONG TERM EFFECTS

If left untreated, PTSD symptoms can become worse. Some documented cases include addiction to drugs or alcohol; chronic pain, hypertension or physical maladies; self injury; overwhelming fear of death; compulsiveness; personality changes; and self destructive incidents, to name a few.

PTSD and the Brain

The brain is one of the most complex systems to understand. It's even harder to understand how it works when PTSD is a factor. The easiest way to understand the brain is to think of yourself as having two brains. You have the Thinking Brain, which is the cortex, the top layer of the brain. This part of the brain is where critical thinking takes place. The Thinking Brain is where the ability to stay organized, stay on task, analyze, and think things through is happening.

This part of the brain has the ability to inhibit or control our impulses, which involves the capacity to stop and think and not act on our first instinct, but, instead do what is needed or most appropriate. When we are upset, it's the part of the brain that says, "Stop! That's your boss! If you cuss him out, you will get fired and then you won't have a job!"

Underneath the Thinking Brain is the limbic system or the Emotional Brain. The limbic system controls many of the complex emotional behaviors we think of as instinct. Limbic system structures are involved in many of our emotions and motivations, particularly those that are related to survival. Different areas of the limbic system have a strong control over emotions such as pleasure, pain, anger, fear, sadness, sexual feelings, and affection.

PTSD and the Workplace

There are at least two different ways we can experience symptoms of PTSD through our workplace:

1. Through the type of work we do. For example you might be a first responder who sees and hears traumatic incidents on a regular basis. You might be a counsellor, or a lawyer who hears the stories of trauma that their clients have experienced. Teachers, nurses, doctors and many other professions are also subject to conditions that result in PTSD.
2. We can also experience conditions at work that result in PTSD through the way we are treated at work. There are a myriad of ways this occurs but we will focus on what is commonly known as Workplace Bullying.

TRAUMA AND THE TYPE OF WORK YOU DO

This is not an exhaustive accounting of what professions experience trauma at work but here is a sampling:

Many professions put employees in physically dangerous situations. For example Canadian Armed Forces personnel, first responders (police, firefighters, and paramedics), corrections personnel, humanitarian aid workers and employees in the banking world have experienced physical trauma or witnessed physical trauma. Other professions often experience trauma more vicariously, such as doctors, nurses, social workers. Teachers are exposed through the children they teach.

CARING FOR YOURSELF IN THE FACE OF DIFFICULT WORK

Our work can be overwhelming. Our challenge is to maintain our resilience so that we can keep doing the work with care, energy, and compassion.

10 THINGS TO DO EACH DAY

1. Get enough sleep.
2. Get enough to eat.
3. Do some light exercise.
4. Vary the work that you do.
5. Do something pleasurable.
6. Focus on what you did well.
7. Learn from your mistakes.
8. Share a private joke.
9. Pray, meditate or relax.
10. Support a colleague.

Two structures of the Emotional Brain that play an important role in PTSD are the amygdala and the hippocampus. The hippocampus is involved in memory forming, organizing, connecting emotions and senses—such as smell and sound—to memories, and storing this information away in long term memory for later use.

The amygdala activates the body's alarm system (the fight or flight response). The amygdala has the unique ability to scan all signals—sights, sounds, smells, etc. It performs threat assessment and says either "there's danger" or "it's safe." The amygdala answers one critical question for survival as stated by Daniel Goleman, "Do I eat it or does it eat me? This is not a question you want to go google." The amygdala is a hair trigger that makes rapid judgments about a situation. It knows nothing about reasoning or cognitive functions and is powerful enough to skip the reasoning and planning part of the brain in order to take immediate action. When this happens it is called an amygdala hijack.

Under normal circumstances, the amygdala and hippocampus communicate with one another and with the rest of the brain in a smooth fashion. However, traumatic stress disrupts the communication between these different areas. The Thinking Brain cannot get the message through to the amygdala that the danger is over and it's okay to relax. The hippocampus cannot take the emotional information processed by the amygdala and store it away as a long term memory. So your memories of trauma stay with you all the time, and you continue to feel as if you are in constant danger.

This explains why a veteran who experienced traumatic events in combat may suffer a surge of anxiety years later when a helicopter flies over head. That helicopter was associated with a traumatic experience. So when your brain hears it, it sends warning signals that danger may be near. The amygdala has no clue if you're in Iraq or home in the United States. It can't tell the difference in location and act accordingly. The biggest problem is this part of the brain cannot tell the difference between a real threat and an imagined threat. So now you have the brain in a "hijacked" state where everything is an emergency, and it runs in crisis mode all the time.

Remember flight or fight happens subconsciously, so it's not something that we can control easily, especially after months of combat or traumatic experiences. And programming like this is not something that can be rewritten overnight. So go easy on yourself.

(<http://www.strengthofawarrior.org/ptsd-and-the-brain/>)



SWITCHING ON AND OFF

It is your empathy for others that helps you do this work. It is vital to take good care of your thoughts and feelings by monitoring how you use them. Resilient workers know how to turn their feelings off when they go on duty, but on again when they go off duty. This is not denial; it is a coping strategy. It is a way they get maximum protection while working (switched off) and maximum support while resting (switched on).

HOW TO BECOME BETTER AT SWITCHING ON AND OFF

1. Switching is a conscious process. Talk to yourself as you switch.
2. Use images that make you feel safe and protected (switch off) or connected and cared for (switch on) to help you switch.
3. Find rituals that help you switch as you start and stop work.
4. Breathe slowly and deeply to calm yourself when starting a tough job.

(ProQOL.org)

Helping people is what we're all about.

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