

Minimizing the Risk of Post Traumatic Stress

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Recently, public attention has been focused on the reactions people have to trauma. Many studies have been done, and many efforts have been made to reduce the possibility of developing a dysfunctional response, which may eventually develop into a full blown psychiatric disorder known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). For the past several years, teams of psychologists and counselors have been deployed to areas where natural or violent incidents have occurred in order to intervene with survivors of these traumatic events. Yet, much of this has been done without any real understanding of the process of surviving trauma, and with all of their good intentions, may have actually increased their likelihood of the development of PTSD.

Historically, the interventions that have been tried with survivors have often resulted in increasing the delayed anxiety and nightmare symptomology, over the years, doctors have routinely dispensed barbiturates or benzodiazepines to assist people getting through the initial days immediately following the traumatic incidents. This has, unfortunately resulted in increasing the likelihood of developing a delayed stress reaction, psychologists armed with this knowledge then swooped down on populations surviving major trauma in an effort to help them process their feelings. However, this too failed to produce the results which they worked diligently, often with no remuneration, to accomplish.

While at this time there are no guaranteed steps to use to avoid development of the debilitating disorder, there are certain measures that can be taken to reduce the risk, or even decrease the symptomology. What we know now is that getting a trauma survivor to talk in depth about the event without time to process and assimilate the experience actually increases the likelihood of development of PTSD symptoms. This information is crucial for the support systems of these survivors to be armed with in their efforts to provide support. Now armed with this information, helpers can intervene with responses that are actually able to assist with the resolution of the trauma. It is important, in working with survivors immediately after a traumatic event, to help them re-establish a sense of control.

Simple questioning which do not require in-depth responses are helpful. Ask “What name would you like for me to call you?”, “could I get you a glass of water?” or “Where would you like to sit?” DO

NOT ask them to immediately begin describing the events as this can actually increase the likelihood of developing PTSD. DO tell them that their reactions are a natural response to a traumatic event. They should be reassured that while the traumatic experience creates a sense of chaos in their lives, they are not actually “crazy”. If the person is going to be involved in a criminal investigation, then informing them of what will be expected of them, and providing them with the details of the course of events which will follow will assist them in feeling more in control.

Further, education about PTSD can help to alleviate fear of “going crazy” if they understand that their responses are normal, and frequently experienced by survivors of trauma. They need to understand that the reactions they have, while intense, are NOT evidence of them “going crazy”, but instead indicate that they are responding normally to an abnormal event. They also need to be reassured that there is no shame in seeking psychological help from time to time, especially in periods of high stress. Treatment can actually quickly reduce traumatic stress symptoms and prevent decay of the survivors functioning.

Certain self care measures may decrease the likelihood of development of PTSD. Shortly after a traumatic event has occurred, it is important for the survivor to take the time to restore a sense of control and meaning to their lives. For the first days immediately after the event, they should be encouraged to NOT discuss the event details, but instead to make contact with family and friends in some kind of normal setting which will restore a sense that life can go on even in the face of such a horrible experience. This will also allow them to re-establish a sense of being connected to other people in an important way. Spending non-stressful time, in the company of people who care about the survivor will provide a sense of purpose and meaning to life which at this point may be in serious question for the survivor.

Societal response to a traumatic event is frequently to make efforts to get the survivor to medicate the feelings of shock and despair which are the initial responses to the event, it is critical to NOT medicate with drugs, (either prescribed or not) or with alcohol. Diving back full force into a heavy work