



POST- TRAUMATIC STRESS

Understanding the Syndrome



Atornado roars through a rural town, leveling what had just moments before been a thriving community. Elsewhere, a commuter bus goes out of control in a busy rush-hour intersection, hitting pedestrians and sideswiping parked cars. In both cases, rescue workers say it looks like a war zone. But in spite of their own emotions, the emergency teams work to save the living. Only later might they consider the horrible scene.

The Emergency Reaction

In order to function in an emergency, it's necessary for us to put our own feelings and normal human reactions aside. Our conscious mind swiftly denies that we even have such feelings and we set about to act. That denial is not permanent, however, and sooner or later we will have to acknowledge our feelings. Most of the time this process takes place and we come to terms with the situation without really being aware of it.

The Delayed Reaction

When we delay reactions to an emergency situation in order to act, or because the situation is shocking, we're possible candidates for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). First identified during World War I as shell shock, it was later brought to public attention after the Vietnam War. But PTSD is not limited to soldiers or to emergency workers. Anyone who is involved in a stressful emergency, even as a witness, can develop PTSD.

The Reality

Sometimes the event is so overwhelming that coming to terms with its reality is very difficult. We replay the scene over and over in our minds. It's difficult to stop thinking or talking about it. It intrudes in our sleep in the form of nightmares. This can continue for weeks or months after the actual event and signifies a deeper emotional trauma which comes to the surface only when the process of denial ends.

Stress and PTSS

One of the keys to understanding PTSD is to understand that each of us reacts differently to stress. We have no way of knowing in advance what kind of situation will affect us adversely. What upsets one person may not upset another to the same degree or at all. It's no reflection on the "strength" or "toughness" of the individual.

Available Help

Professional counseling immediately after the incident is important to head off PTSD before it starts. People often need to be given permission to discuss their feelings. Counseling soon after the onset of PTSD is very effective, and with time, the syndrome can be treated successfully.