The Misconceptions of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

This article is sponsored by Otsuka America Pharmaceutical, Inc., for which Dr. Altha Stewart is a paid consultant.

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Medical experts estimate that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) affects nearly 12 million American adults in a given year, yet the signs and symptoms often go unrecognized or underreported due to common misconceptions. Given a lack of understanding surrounding this condition, it is important to raise awareness and provide individuals experiencing PTSD symptoms with the resources they may need.

Traditionally, PTSD has often been connected to military trauma. However, the majority of patients with PTSD are members of the general population rather than the veteran population. This disorder can develop in any individual who witnesses or experiences a traumatic event, such as sexual violence, child abuse, or a life-threatening injury or illness. These individuals may have difficulty coping and adjusting, which can cause worsening symptoms that impact aspects of their day-to-day lives if not treated appropriately. Education on PTSD is critical for those living with this disorder as well as their loved ones.

The Impact of PTSD on Women and People of Color

“While many people commonly identify PTSD as a military disease that mainly affects men, it’s important to understand that an estimated 86 percent of those affected by this disorder have not served in the military in any capacity,” said Dr. Stewart. “Furthermore, data suggest women are twice as likely to develop PTSD than men, and prevalence of the condition is highest for black individuals.”

Adult women with PTSD account for more than half of the overall PTSD population in the United States, and black individuals also have a higher risk of developing PTSD following exposure to trauma compared to white individuals. Unfortunately, stigma is a large barrier to treatment seeking in patients with PTSD.

“Only about half of patients with PTSD seek treatment,” said Dr. Stewart. “As a result, untreated PTSD can lead to significant psychosocial, humanistic and even economic challenges in patients’ lives.”

The potential burdens an individual with PTSD may experience include:

- Difficulty managing and maintaining interpersonal relationships.
- A lower perception of their quality of life.
- The inability to adapt to societal norms.
- Higher proportions of individuals living below the poverty line which can lead to homelessness.
- An increased risk of suicide.

Spotting the Symptoms of PTSD

"Symptoms of PTSD may occur soon after exposure to a traumatic event, but can also be delayed," said Dr. Stewart. "What makes it especially tricky to identify, is that its symptoms may overlap with other mental health conditions. In fact, individuals with PTSD are 80 percent more likely than those without PTSD to have symptoms that meet diagnostic criteria for at least one other mental disorder such as depression or anxiety. Because of this, the condition is often under-recognized and misdiagnosed."

PTSD is characterized by four symptom clusters in response to trauma:

- Re-Experiencing: Recurrent intrusive memories, traumatic nightmares, and flashbacks.
- Avoidance: The avoidance of trauma-related thoughts or feelings, as well as people, places, or objects associated with the trauma.
- Negative mood and cognition: Distorted beliefs, guilt, shame, numbing, and feelings of alienation.
- Alterations in arousal: Manifested as irritability, hypervigilance, and sleep disturbance.

PTSD is diagnosed based on a set of criteria including the presence of at least one intrusion symptom such as flashbacks or nightmares, persistent avoidance of at least one stimulus associated with the traumatic event, and duration or symptoms lasting more than one month. The symptoms also must be unrelated to substance use or other medical conditions.

Weighing the Approaches to Management of PTSD

"Early diagnosis and intervention are important for the effective management of PTSD," said Dr. Stewart. "Reaching out to a healthcare professional is a critical first step for anyone experiencing the signs or symptoms of PTSD so their provider can identify an effective treatment plan and help prevent existing symptoms from worsening."

Psychotherapy including exposure-based therapy and cognitive processing therapy has demonstrated clinical benefits in the treatment of PTSD.

Changing the Conversation on PTSD

Ultimately, there may be several reasons why a person with PTSD symptoms may not seek the help they need, such as discomfort in talking to a therapist or psychologist, or they may feel that asking for help is a sign of weakness. There is often a negative stigma surrounding individuals with mental illness, which may further prevent those suffering from opening up about their struggles.

“People with PTSD may be reluctant to seek help, which is why continued education and communications are so critical to helping people come forward,” said Dr. Stewart. “By speaking about your own mental health or asking loved ones about their mental state, we can help shift the narrative and empower those suffering from mental illness to seek the help they need.”

For more information on PTSD, available resources, and support, please go to www.nexusmentalhealth.com.

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