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EMOTIONAL WELLNESS

There's Hope and Help For Those Facing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

By MARGIE DRUSS FODOR
SPECIAL TO HEALTH QUARTERLY

Some are afraid and stay locked in their homes. Others suffer nightmares or feel suicidal. Still others are haunted by flashbacks from the battlefield. These are just some of the crippling effects of post traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.

PTSD not only keeps a person from living a full life, but it can also take its toll on the sufferer's co-workers, family and friends.

Dr. Sharad Wagle, chief of psychiatry at Holy Name Medical Center, in Teaneck, recalls one man who developed PTSD following an unprovoked and vicious attack one night by strangers. Traumatized, he was terrified to leave his house. Several years of outpatient therapy was able to help alleviate the man's fears, Dr. Wagle said.

"The only thing I need to do is give them some glimmer of hope," Dr. Wagle said of patients with PTSD. "Once they leave at the end of the first session, if they are feeling slightly better, they are going to come back."

Holy Name Medical Center is one of many area medical facilities that can offer help to those with PTSD and the conditions often associated with the disorder. Englewood Hospital and Medical Center in Englewood and the Ramapo Ridge Psychiatric Hospital, part of the Christian Health Care Center, in Wyckoff, are other Bergen County-area facilities that can help people with PTSD.

Of course, the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs has had years of experience helping servicemen and women with PTSD, known in years past as "shell shock" and "battle fatigue." The VA's National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder marked its 25th anniversary on August 29.

PTSD affects about 7.7 million American adults, according to the National Institute of Mental Health. The condition can affect persons of any age and sufferers typically are war veterans, survivors of physical, mental and sexual abuse, accidents, disasters and other serious events, NIMH reports.

PTSD seems to have become more well-known with the return of war veterans. The US Department of Veteran Affairs says about 6 out of every 10 men and 5 out of every 10 women "will experience at least one trauma in their lives." For men, the trauma is typically from combat, disasters and accidents, while women experience it more from sexual assaults/abuse.

"The goal is to get them back to the state they were mentally and emotionally before this trauma happened," Dr. Wagle said.

While it is normal to be afraid when you are in danger, those with PTSD feel stressed or scared even when no danger exists. The condition can develop after a terrifying ordeal or an ordeal affecting someone close. Symptoms can include flashbacks, nightmares, reoccurring scary thoughts, depression, worry, feeling emotionally numb or suicidal.

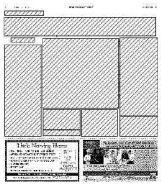
Englewood Hospital has an inpatient psychiatric unit that treats patients with a number of disorders, which can include PTSD. Englewood Hospital and Medical Center's Adult Behavioral Health Services is a short-term program for those 18 and older. The hospital treats all major psychiatric disorders such as bipolar disorder, depression, anxiety, psychosis and schizophrenia.

Dr. Vinod Suresh, staff psychiatrist at Englewood Hospital, said PTSD can be treated in a variety of ways.

Therapists work with patients to get them to open up and deal with their traumatic experience. Talk therapy can be one-on-one, or in groups. Treatments for PTSD, according to medical professionals and the National Institute of Mental Health, include the following:

■ **COGNITIVE RESTRUCTING**
Medical professionals work with patients to help them understand what happened to them in a realistic manner.

■ **EXPOSURE THERAPY**
This type of therapy helps patients face their fears and learn to control them.



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Writing, mental imagery and other methods are used.

■ **MEDICATIONS**

Prescription medications such as sertraline (Zoloft), or paroxetine (Paxil), have been used to treat adults with PTSD. Both are antidepressants.

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"This is something you can talk about just like any other mental illness or even medical condition," Dr. Suresh said. "Literature says the hallmark of treatment is cognitive behavioral psychotherapy. Medicines are used for management."

FAMILY FEATURES

PTSD tends to be downplayed by the individual themselves, possibly because they feel shame, according to Dr. Howard Gilman, medical executive of the Christian Health Care Center, which runs the Ramapo Ridge Psychiatric Hospital, a 58-bed psychiatric hospital for adults and geriatric patients that also offers outpatient services.

"There's good evidence that getting help for PTSD is much more effective than not getting help," Dr. Gilman said.

Women are typically more likely to ask for help with PTSD. However, men are increasingly coming forward, said Barbara Lankelis, a licensed certified social worker at Christian Health Care Center. Just by coming to her door means they are open to help, she said.

"People think that the treatment will erase the memory. It's just going to bring it down," she said. "I have to instill in them that there is hope. If they talk, they will move to the other side."

The Department of Veterans Affairs offers a wealth of information on PTSD.

"Our most important accomplishment is that we helped educate policymakers as well as the public that PTSD was not something that happened only to Vietnam Veterans, but could happen to veterans of other wars and to any man, woman or child faced with a catastrophic event," said Dr. Matthew Friedman, senior advisor and former executive director of the National Center for PTSD, in a VA media release.

Not everyone experiencing trauma will develop PTSD. If you or if you think someone close to you has PTSD, medical professionals encourage you to talk with your doctor about available treatment.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF BRANDPOINT

Readjusting to family life can sometimes be challenging for returning members of the military who have served in areas of armed conflict. Coping with health-related problems like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can make the readjustment difficult and ongoing.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BRANDPOINT

PTSD tends to be downplayed by the individual themselves. But women are typically more likely to ask for help with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, according to health professionals.

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