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Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Response to Sexual Assault Among Women In the United States

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Sexual Assault described in technical terms is defined as any sort of sexual activity between two or more people in which one of the people involved is involved against his or her will. (3) The description of "against his or her will" extends to varying degrees of aggression, ranging from indirect pressure to a direct physical attack. According to the Crime Victim Research and Treatment Center 1.3 adult women are sexually assaulted in the United States every minute. (1) Of these assaults 84% of the attacks occur by someone the victim knows. The Senate Judiciary Committee the United States sighted the United States as having the highest rate of sexual assaults per capita in the world. (1) Unfortunately the majority of sexual assaults that occur against women go unreported. Only 31% of sexual assaults that occurred in 1996 were reported to law enforcement authorities. (1) The problem of sexual assault is increasing. In the year 2000 the number of sexual assaults against women had increased by 16.5%. (1) A woman's reaction to sexual assault can vary. Feelings of guilt, being ashamed, intense anger, and denial are common. In addition a woman can feel stigmatized by those around her and her community.

A question to look at is how victims of sexual assault deal with the trauma that they have experienced. The assaults often times have psychological repercussions. In addition a woman can develop health problems. These health problems can develop as varying degrees of depression, anxiety, and clinical stress. An issue to look at is how much control a victim of sexual assault has over her reaction. How much control can a woman have over repressing her emotions? How much of control does a woman have over her physical response to trauma? Furthermore what is the relationship between the mind and body? If a woman tries to repress her psychological response, does she develop a physical reaction? One type of disorder that develops among many women who have experienced sexual assault is called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD. While the exact symptoms, and the length that PTSD lasts varies, the disorder is found among many victims of sexual assault.

The symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder vary. They can include an increased level of anxiety, which can result in difficulty sleeping, concentrating, and an exaggerated response to noise. PTSD can affect a woman who has experienced sexual assault ability to remember past events, in particular events associated with her assault. (2) PTSD can cause feelings of detachment and numbness, as well as a desire to avoid anything that the victim might associate with her assault. While doctors have been able to identify the symptoms in many victims of sexual assault the exact cause of the disorder is still questioned. Is the disorder the body's response to trauma? If so what relationship exists between the symptoms associated with PTSD as trauma? A strong correlation has been found between sufferers of PTSD and poor health. (3) PTSD can lead to depression and sickness. PTSD if not treated can also indirectly cause accidents that can affect a victim's health. These accidents can be the result high levels of anxiety, of a lack of ability to focus, and a lack of ability to respond.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can develop in two different forms, Complex Traumatic Stress Disorder and Acute Traumatic Stress disorder. (3) Complex PTSD, also known as Disorder of Extreme Stress is found among victims who have been exposed to prolonged traumatic circumstances. (3) Acute PTSD is found among victims who have been

exposed to short-term trauma or isolated incidents of trauma. One question to ask is how does PTSD affect the brain? Sufferers of PTSD have been found to have abnormal levels of hormones that help the body respond to stress. Biologically victims of trauma can respond biologically by having lower levels of cortisone and increased levels of epinephrine and norepinephrine. (4) In addition the function of the thyroid, and the transmission of serotonin and opiates, is affected. Serotonin affects the transmission of messages between nerve cells. (1) The release of opiates is a way that the body blocks its response to pain. (4)

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder affects the body's ability to remember and its ability to express emotion. Studies done on the brains of victims of sexual assault have suggested that suffering a trauma can affect the hippocampus. (4) The hippocampus is a part of the brain that is involved in recalling memory and emotion. Scientists are now questioning whether the change in the hippocampus is responsible for flashbacks that can occur in sufferers of PTSD. (4) In addition to changes in the hippocampus, victims of sexual assault experience an increased level of release of corticotropin. This release is responsible for triggering the body into responding to stress. The result to a release of high levels of corticotropin can be a startled response. (4)

Treatment for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can be approached from two directions: through psychological therapy, and through the use of medicine. Because doctors and scientist have yet to fully understand PTSD and how it affects the body, treatment approaches are limited. The psychological treatment approach to PTSD can include Cognitive-behavior therapy (CBT). (3) CBT works to change the emotions that a victim of trauma feels. This is done through re-exposure to feelings associated with the trauma, followed by an analysis of the response. Through re-exposure therapists CBT can readjust a victim's behavioral response to the trauma that they experienced. CBT includes teaching a victim how to deal with the anxiety and stress that they experience. (3) The medicinal approach to treating Post Traumatic Stress Disorder includes the prescription selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs). SSRIs work to correct the imbalance of serotonin in a trauma sufferer. (3) Overall the best method for the treatment of PTSD has proven to be a combination of both psychological therapy, and pharmacotherapy. This suggests that there is a direct relationship between the mind and body in their response to trauma. It also leads us to question the specific effects that trauma can have on a victim psychologically and physically. If a victim represses her psychological reaction, does that affect the way she will respond physically?

What affect does an environment have on a victim's response to trauma? Do woman who feel that they are in a supportive environment recover quicker than woman who feel isolated? What correlation can be found between the high rate of sexual assaults against women in the United States and the number of cases of PTSD diagnosed? If women who have been sexually assaulted felt that they could express their trauma more openly in American society, their recovery would be faster. The feelings of being stigmatized, feeling ashamed, and feeling guilt are reactions imposed upon victims of sexual assault by the communities that they live in. Furthermore if more efforts were made to prevent sexual assault against women in the first place were made, the number of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Cases would decrease. As more is learned about the implications that the environment can have on a victim of trauma, as well as the relationship between the mind and body, more can be learned about treating Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

References

- 1) [Sexual Assault Crisis and Support Center](#)
- 2) [National Center for PTSD](#)
- 3) [Informational website on PTSD](#)
- 4) [Website for the National Mental Health Association](#)
- 5) Website for Zoloft