Determinants of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

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ABSTRACT

Pakistan’s population has been greatly affected by psychological stressors on daily basis such as suicide bombing, target killing, street crimes, earth quakes, and floods... Unavailability of coping resources and shortage of mental health professionals has increased the prevalence of mental disorders in Pakistan. This paper aims to provide a brief overview of situation in Pakistan, leading to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Natural as well as man-made disasters in Pakistan have increased the prevalence of PTSD among the survivors and rescue workers. Socioeconomic, exposure, socio-cultural, appraisal, and personality factors are found to be key determinants of PTSD.

KEY WORDS: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Mental Disorders, Determinants of PTSD.

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INTRODUCTION

We all face trauma and loss at some point in time in our lives; however most of us do not get mentally ill. Think of a child who has witnessed the loss of all his family members in a war or a natural disaster like earth quake. The flash back memories of such event could be very traumatic for that child and need urgent medical attention. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is a psychiatric disorder that a person may develop after experiencing or witnessing another person receiving actual or potential harm including serious bodily injury or sexual abuse (Kidwai, 2011). Years of war in this region and Pakistan’s commitment for war against terrorism have devastated the lives of people. Mother Nature has been quite harsh and floods for the last two years have increased the misery of people living in Pakistan.

DISCUSSION

Significance

Natural disasters and manmade disasters like flood, earthquake, hurricane, and war are prevalent traumatic events around the globe. Among these traumatic events earthquake is a commonly occurring natural disaster. Several researches have shown that substantial survivors of earth quake can suffer from emotional disorder such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, other anxiety disorders, and depression. It is estimated that 939 earth quakes of a magnitude between 5 and 8 on the Richter scale occur around the world (Naeem et al., 2011). The significance of this issue in Pakistan has been highlighted by several studies. One of the studies was conducted by Naeem et al. (2011) after 18 months of a major earthquake in 2005 of magnitude 7.6 on the Richter scale that hit the mountainous regions of northern Pakistan and Kashmir. They found out that the prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder among men and women living in the homes and tents were 33.4% and 55.2% respectively.

This issue is not only significant for general population but also for rescue workers including health care professionals engaged in disaster relief activities because they are also at a high risk of developing emotional disorders such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. A study on the recovery workers involved in response to the 2005 earth quake in northern Pakistan found out high levels of emotional problems. The findings of the study suggested that more than 40% of participants showed clinically relevant levels of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and approximately 20% have significant levels of anxiety and depression. This high prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder can be attributed to the fact that 72.3% of participants were involved in rescue work immediately after the earth quake and 49.8% saw the dead bodies during the rescue and cleaning up period (Ehring, Razik & Emmelkamp , 2011).

What is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder?

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is an anxiety disorder that occurs after a threatening event, most often an accident, crime, battle or natural disaster (Frisch & Frisch 1998). The American Psychiatric Association describes Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as the exposure to an event in which the person experiences, or witnesses actual or threatened death or serious injury in which the person’s response involves intense fear, helplessness, or horror. The symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder includes; re-experiencing the event (nightmares, flashback, distress, and physiological changes when recalling that event), avoidance of the trauma thoughts (loss of interest, detachment, emotional numbing, and psychogenic amnesia), and hyper arousal symptoms (insomnia, irritability, hyper vigilance, and memory problems) (Näeem et al., 2011). This disorder was introduced into psychiatric nomenclature in 1980 with the 3rd edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM-III (Stein et al., 2007).

Population at Risk

Anyone who experiences traumatic event can suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder however, women as compared to men are more prone. Similarly individuals who experience adverse events in the early life or childhood and those who respond to disaster or crimes like police, fire personnel, and health care
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professional are at a higher risk for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Kidwai, 2011).

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**Socioeconomic Factor**

People who have good income or are from good socioeconomic background are less likely to suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder even in adverse life situation as compared to people with low socioeconomic background. A person having more financial resources can manage well with traumatic event and can live a reasonable life. It is very difficult for a poor person to survive because he could not meet his basic needs without financial resources. Naeem et al (2011), found that 35.3% of participants from the earthquake survivors who had incomes up to Rs5,999 suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder as compared to only 0.2% participants who had incomes greater than Rs25000. The prevalence of Post Traumatic Stress disorder decrease drastically as the incomes increase which indicate that socioeconomic status is a very strong predictor of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Unfortunately in our society people take advantage in these adverse situations and increase the prices of basic commodities making the situation worse for the affected people.

**Exposure Factor**

The severity of symptoms depends on the dose of exposure that an individual may get. It is very crucial to determine where the subject was at the time of event, damage to that place, and level of participation. People who were somewhere else at the time of event are less likely to have symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Naeem et al., 2011). The damage occurred to the place or property will affect the severity of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder because the people have to live outside that place, may be in tents. So living in tents is most likely to trigger symptoms.

**Socio-cultural Factors**

To understand the phenomena of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, determining the social context is very important because adverse event does not happen in isolation. This determinant can be viewed from several aspects. In Pakistani culture joint family system act as a protective mechanism against psychiatric symptoms and also important source of support in this culture (Naeem et al., 2011). Traumatic events often shattered the social networks through the death of significant others (Joseph, William & Yule, 1995). At the same time community may become more united and cohesive as they share similar context. This adverse event may be taken as an opportunity to build new relations in order to cope with the situation. Another important concept to address is resilience in our society. Resilience acts as a protective mechanism and there is a need to strengthen such concepts for mental health promotion and mental illness prevention.

**Appraisal Factors**

The appraisal is centrally important in determining subsequent reactions to stressful event. How the stressful event is perceived is a product of the nature of the stimulus itself, the social context and personality factors. People have a need to explain the event that occurs in their world and this explanation is known as attribution (Joseph, William & Yule, 1995). The nature of a person’s explanation has consequences for how he or she will respond to that event. For example person who appraises an adverse event as a chance will have different reaction than a person who appraises similar adverse event as God’s Punishment.

**Personality Factor**

There are certain personality traits that make a person more vulnerable to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. It was found that dysfunctional thinking is activated by stressful events for those with a prior history of depression (Miranda, 1992). It is also said that individuals who characteristically explain negative events in terms of internal, stable, and global causes and positive events in terms of external, unstable, and global causes are vulnerable to depression. The personality traits, cognitive structures or schemata are formed during the period of development hence the individual learn to respond rapidly and
automatically without conscious efforts. Optimistic personality trait plays a major role in person’s life to cope with such stressful events, whereas pessimist person will face more challenges to deal with such situation. There are individuals who develop rules for living in their childhood to maintain their self-esteem and sense of safety, but they are too rigid, extreme and absolute. For these individuals everything appears to be black and white and any deviation is conceived as loss of control.

CONCLUSION

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is highly prevalent among the survivors of major adverse events in Pakistan such as earthquake, flood, and man-made disasters. In order to have a clear understanding of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder the determinants needs to be considered. Although adverse event in person’s life lead to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder however socioeconomic, exposure, sociocultural, appraisal, and personality factors are major determinants.

REFERENCES


