



Lisbeth Salander

Professor Kelp

English 102

22 March 2013

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: Secondary Traumatization

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder is a devastating anxiety disorder that affects many active military personnel and veterans. In many cases Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) goes untreated often due to the individual not realizing that they are being affected by the disorder, or by the individual having previous failed attempts at treatment. Even though PTSD is now being recognized as a disorder that affects many soldiers, the disorder's effect on family is not as widely recognized. The spouses and children of individuals with PTSD often experience similar negative symptoms of the disorder; this is referred to as secondary traumatization or compassion fatigue. Many families of active military personnel and veterans suffering from PTSD appear to have secondary traumatization, as they experience similar symptoms and feelings of loneliness, which leads to them feeling as though they are also suffering from the disorder.

People who suffer from PTSD experience many symptoms including, but not limited to: feelings of tension, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, loss of control, and nightmares. The families of these soldiers often experience similar symptoms. An article published in the journal *Family Relations* describes how wives experience similar symptoms as their husbands: "the wife may experience symptoms of depression, anxiety, guilt, and distressing dreams" (Dekel 25). These symptoms come as a result to the continuous ambiguity the wives feel regarding the loss of their partner as they used to be. Secondary traumatization can also be seen in the children of active military personnel and veterans. In the same article published in *Family Relations*, a mother described how her children were being affected by stating that, "Some of the things have passed on to the kids. I've also become like that. I hear a noise, and it disturbs me. We live in an area full of airplanes passing overhead. I have been awakened a few times by an

The AWC Writing Center is located in the Student Success Center Building (SC) directly behind the LA building on the north side of campus.

Student Success Center • www.azwestern.edu/ssc • 928-317-6029





explosion... we've been affected by his condition" (Dekel 28). Even though the family members were never in any danger, they began reacting to situations with the same severe anxiety as their veteran father/spouse who was suffering from PTSD. Suffering from these symptoms has caused the family members to have to endure the same anxious state of mind as someone who is suffering from PTSD. Along with sharing similar symptoms with their returning soldier, family members of people affected with PTSD also endure strong feelings of loneliness as a result to living with someone who has disappeared emotionally.

Families of active military personnel and veterans who suffer from PTSD also show symptoms of secondary traumatization by the severe feelings of loneliness that they endure. People who suffer from PTSD often live a life of non-living; they confine themselves to their homes as much as possible and are emotionally distant from their families. In return, the families of these people feel that they have lost an important member of their family. In an article in the journal *Family Relations*, a woman describes the loneliness she feels by having a husband who suffers from PTSD by declaring that, "It's as if I live alone. I have to prepare everything; I have to do everything alone. If I want to go out [he says], 'go by yourself',...What am I—am I a widow? Am I divorced? I'm not divorced and not a widow ... I have a husband!" (Dekel 30). Since her husband does not help with the work and will not leave the house with her, the woman feels as though she has lost her husband. Even though their family member returned from the war, families of people suffering from PTSD suffer some of the same loss as people who have family that died in the war. The feeling of loss that family members of people with PTSD endure has become more widely explored in literature.

PTSD's impact on family members through secondary traumatization is also explored in literature. Henry, a character in Louise Erdrich's "The Red **Convertible**", is described as being, "quiet, so quiet, and never comfortable sitting still anywhere but always up and moving around...Henry was jumpy and mean"(Erdrich 444). In this description Erdrich described Henry as having the same PTSD symptoms that many returning soldiers have today. Louise Erdrich





continues to describe the impact of PTSD on family in her description of Lyman's feelings of loneliness when he states, "I had been feeling down in the dumps about Henry around this time. We had always been together before. Henry and Lyman. But he was such a loner now that I didn't know how to take it" (Erdrich 445). Since his brother was distancing himself from his family physically and emotionally, Lyman began feeling lonely, as if his brother had never returned from the war. The symptoms and feelings that are depicted in *The Red Convertible* are issues that many families of PTSD undergo on a daily basis.

Even though it is widely known that PTSD affects many returning soldiers, the effect that PTSD has on families is not always as apparent. Shared symptoms and overwhelming feelings of loneliness are two symptoms that families of people suffering from PTSD often acquire. These symptoms are caused by the family member, who is caring for the person suffering from PTSD, being completely immersed into their mental state, drawing them into the person's tortured emotional world. People suffering from these symptoms can be described as having secondary traumatization, an anxiety disorder that can be just as devastating as PTSD.

Works Cited

- Erdrich, Louise. "The Red Convertible" *Literature: Craft and Voice*. Ed. Nicholas Delbanco and Alan Cheuse. 2nd ed. New York: McGraw, 2013. 444-445. Print.
- Rachel Dekel, Hadass Goldblatt, Michal Keidar, Zahava Solomon and Michael Polliack. *Family Relations*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Jan, 2005), pp. 24-34. March 19, 1013.