

Finding a Spiritual Path through Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

William Rabior, ACSW



Liguori

Imprimi Potest:

Thomas D. Picton, CSsR
Provincial, Denver Province
The Redemptorists

ISBN 978-0-7648-1831-8

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Cover design: Jodi Hendrickson

Cover image: Shutterstock

Printed in the United States of America

23 22 21 20 19 / 6 5 4 3 2

Understanding Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

In the United States, at any given time there are millions of people suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder (commonly abbreviated as PTSD). Females are much more likely to develop this illness than males, possibly because more women are victimized by violent acts such as sexual abuse. PTSD has been identified in children as young as toddlers.

For many years, PTSD was something relegated to warfare. Soldiers traumatized by the horrors of war were described as experiencing “shell shock” or “combat fatigue.” Even centuries ago, there was recognition that warfare could be an overwhelmingly stressful and mind-damaging experience.

By 1980, the psychiatric community had officially recognized posttraumatic stress disorder as a formal diagnosis, and a broader understanding developed about the causes of

PTSD. The disorder can occur following any kind of traumatic event, not just war. To better understand PTSD and the path toward healing, we will consider the experiences of a few individuals. Their stories offer some valuable insights into what PTSD is like, and what it can do to people who suffer from it.

Learning From the Stories

Patricia

Patricia taught for many years in the Midwest. Upon retiring, she decided that living in the South where the winters are warm sounded very appealing, so she moved to Florida. Her life there was nearly perfect for the first two years. In late summer of the third year, disaster struck. Her small community was destroyed by a monster hurricane. It demolished Patricia's house, and she lost most of her possessions. For three days, she perched on a window ledge in her attic and waited to be rescued, anxiously watching as the waters steadily rose.

"It was the most terrifying experience of my entire life," she said emotionally. "I thought I was going to drown or perhaps be bitten by one of the snakes I could see swimming by. All I could do was put my trust in God and hold on for dear life."

On the third day, a deputy sheriff in a boat rescued Pat. Her insurance company paid for a new home, and she tried to readjust to starting over again. But something wasn't right inside of her. "I just couldn't stop thinking about what had happened to me," she said. "It played over and over in my head like a bad video. I began to have nightmares almost every time I fell asleep, even during the day when I took a nap. I became afraid to be alone, and I was tense all the time. I had always prided myself on being super-responsible, but after awhile I didn't even have the energy to pay my bills. I was depressed but didn't know it."

What changed things for her? She smiles when she remembers. "God sent me the people I needed to find the healing I needed. My next-door neighbor is a psychologist. When I started sharing with her what I was experiencing, she recognized it immediately as PTSD. She sent me to a physician who listened to my story compassionately. He prescribed an antidepress-

sant medication to stabilize my mood and sent me to a support group of people who had also been traumatized—many by hurricanes, too.”

Within three months, Patricia felt like her “old self” again. She learned the importance of self-care. “Now, when the hurricane season comes around each year, I still feel some anxiety, but I’ve learned how to cope with it. I’ve taken charge of my feelings and emotions. I control them; they don’t control me. And I’m not going to let the threat of a storm drive me away from the sunshine I love so much.”

Sam

Sam spent a year in Iraq, seeing combat regularly, which traditionally has been viewed as one of the classic factors that leads to PTSD. Yet he seemed to function well and was psychologically stable, both over there and after he got home—until he was involved in a serious car accident from which he spent months recovering.

“At first I just could not understand what was happening,” he said. “I would experience flashbacks of the car accident one moment; then in the next moment, I would find myself reliving something that occurred in Iraq like the death of one of my closest friends. Separate events like that would piggyback together. After awhile, I thought I was going crazy.”

What turned things around for Sam? “My wife is a nurse, and she correctly guessed that the accident had triggered posttraumatic stress disorder in me. I was being emotionally mauled by reliving events from both the war and the car accident. She knew I couldn’t handle this alone, so she made an appointment for me at our local VA hospital. I went, because the hurting got to be too much. I was reaching the end of my rope. At the VA hospital, I got both individual and group therapy that taught me how to function better, even when symptoms reappear. I may be one of the walking wounded, but I can accept that. Above all, I discovered

that I can still have a good life and be happy, even with PTSD.”

Janine

In her senior year of college, Janine was walking home from class one night when she was sexually assaulted and badly beaten. She successfully identified her assailant, and in the trial that followed, she testified against him. He was convicted and sentenced to a long prison term. Janine thought she could put the whole terrifying event behind her. But she felt something changing inside of her and wasn't quite sure what it was.

“At first I became afraid to go out alone after dark,” she said. “Then gradually, that same fear extended itself to the daytime, too. I began to stay inside more. Loud noises would practically make me jump right out of my skin, and I would cry so easily that I couldn't even watch the news on television. I still was able to go to my classes, but I was unable to walk anywhere

near where the attack took place; I would take a huge detour that took me at least a mile out of my way. I was an emotional mess, and I didn't know what to do."

What helped change her situation? "I went to Mass one Sunday morning, because I was desperately seeking God's help. I knew I needed healing, but I didn't know where to begin. It was the season of Advent, and the readings told of God giving comfort to his people. I said to God, 'Please comfort me. I can't go on like this, show me what to do.'"

Miracles still do happen. "That very same day," Janine said, "I happened to glance at the parish bulletin after Mass. In it was a description of PTSD, along with a notice that a support group for persons with PTSD would be starting soon. It was going to be led by a religious sister who had herself been traumatized and had recovered. I called her the very next day. We talked, and I went."

It changed Janine's life for the better. "It