PTSD in Female Soldiers and 9/11 First Responders

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Sandrine Shaw in the Netflix series, Collateral suffers from PTSD after returning from a tour in Afghanistan. She is also subjected to unwanted sexual attention from a superior officer. Unfortunately, it is not only in the show that women in the military experience these awful things every day. When researching issues that affected female soldiers, the two biggest issues were Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Military Sexual Trauma (MST). “ According to PTSD United, 71% of these women develop Military Sexual Trauma (MST) due to sexual assault within the rank” and “20% of female veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan experience PTSD” (The Soldiers Project, 2018). It is horrifying to me to see that these are such large issues that affect so many.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD, is a “psychiatric disorder that can occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, rape or other violent personal assault” (American Psychiatric Association, 2018). PTSD doesn’t just occur in veterans, it can happen to anyone who has had to deal with a traumatic event. Women have double the risk for developing PTSD and other disorders caused by trauma. “ Women in the military are at a higher risk for exposure to sexual harassment or sexual assault than men” (Military.com, 2018). There are a few reasons for the higher incidence of PTSD for women, these include being more at risk for being sexually assaulted, which can cause PTSD, and that women might be more likely to blame the traumatic experience on themselves (Military.com, 2018). Military sexual trauma is defined as:

“any sexual activity in which one is involved against one’s will – he or she may have been pressured into sexual activities (for example, with threats of negative consequences for refusing to be sexually cooperative or with implied faster promotions or better treatment in exchange for sex), may have been unable to consent to sexual activities (for example, when intoxicated), or may have been physically forced into sexual activities. Other experiences that fall into the category of MST include unwanted sexual touching or grabbing; threatening, offensive remarks about a person’s body or sexual activities; and/or threatening or unwelcome sexual advances” ( US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2018).

Although MST can happen to anyone, it is more likely to happen to females in the military. “ 71% of these women develop Military Sexual Trauma due to sexual assault within the ranks, unwanted sexual activity, insulting sexual comments, or unwanted sexual advances” (The Soldiers Project, 2018). It was shocking to see how many women were impacted by MST, because it is not a topic that is widely discussed.

Some of the symptoms of PTSD are the same for men and women, like “avoidance, numbing, hyper-arousal, and re-experiencing” (The Soldiers Project, 2018). Women also report “ feeling ‘jumpy’, having difficulty expressing emotion, and avoidance behavior around triggering situations” (The Soldiers Project, 2018). Women with PTSD are also at an increased risk for depression and anxiety (The Soldiers Project, 2018). Additionally, men and women can suffer from physical problems (The Soldiers Project, 2018). The symptoms of MST include “PTSD or other psychological health issues, difficulty with relationships and social functioning, physical health problems, substance abuse, and additional medical and mental health conditions” (Disabled American Veterans, n.d.).

Sandrine Shaw, from the Netflix series, Collateral, is a recently returned soldier from Afghanistan. Her brother, father, and best friend all died fighting for their country. Her best friend died in her arms, which was an incredibly traumatic experience for her. We are shown flashback scenes from the day it happened where Shaw had to wash the bits of her best friend out of her hair. Once she returned to Britain, Sandrine expressed a desire to honor them and felt as if she fell short in her most recent tour. At the military base, her senior officer, Major Tim Dyson, sexually assaults her. He blackmails her because he found her phone in her desk, which had evidence about the murder on it. So he threatened to turn her in if she didn’t cooperate. He uses his senior rank and the fact that he would be believed over her to get what he wanted. She blames herself for the traumas she experienced and the sexual traumas that happened to her once she returned. She was hired to kill a supposed terrorist, Abdullah Asif. She agreed to do so because she thought she was getting rid of a terrorist and therefore giving back to her country, since she felt she didn’t do that while she was in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, PTSD also affects the thousands of 9/11 first responders, witnesses, and dispatchers. “More than 15 years after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center (WTC), thousands of men and women who helped with rescue, recovery, and cleanup at the site continue to experience physical and emotional scars, including a high prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)” (American Psychiatric Association, 2016). Additionally, first responders and survivors are still facing long term health effects caused by the wreckage (Mohney, 2016). “Those who stayed in the area and breathed in the dust and smoke have been found to be more at risk for a host of health problems, including cancer, asthma, mental health disorders and gastrointestinal diseases” (Mohney, 2016).

PTSD can be prevented and treated in a variety of ways. Social support and emotional support after experiencing a traumatic event, war or otherwise, is the most important thing in preventing PTSD (The Soldiers Project, 2018). Having someone to talk to whether it is a friend, family member, parent, doctor, or therapist, can be crucial in managing the feelings an individual has after a trauma. “Prevention of PTSD in active-duty personnel is provided via programs aimed at preparing service members for combat and other deployment-related stressors” (Committee on the Assessment of Ongoing Effects in the Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder; Institute of Medicine, 2012). All soldiers have to go through basic training to prepare themselves mentally and physically for deployment. This training gets them ready for military life and demands. It is incredibly important for members of the military to go through intense training to ensure success during their tours. Once deployed, there are other programs to reduce “ the risk of exposure to traumatic events (such as interventions aimed at reducing the risk of military sexual trauma) and on training service members to respond effectively to such events if they occur” (Committee on the Assessment of Ongoing Effects in the Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder; Institute of Medicine, 2012).

There are three phases of prevention: primary, secondary, and tertiary (Committee on the Assessment of Ongoing Effects in the Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder; Institute of Medicine, 2012).

“Interventions that are applied to an entire population before a traumatic event and regardless of the potential for exposure. These are often called primary or universal interventions. Interventions that are applied to individuals who are known to have been exposed to a traumatic event and thus to be at risk for PTSD and who may or may not be showing symptoms of stress. These are called secondary or selective interventions. Interventions aimed at individuals who are displaying symptoms of or have received a diagnosis of PTSD with the goals of preventing worsening of the symptoms and improving functioning. These are called tertiary or indicated interventions” (Committee on the Assessment of Ongoing Effects in the Treatment of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder; Institute of Medicine, 2012).

I included this breakdown of the stages of preventions because I felt that it properly described different interventions and solutions to PTSD. An example of a primary intervention is the combat training all recruits receive. An example of a secondary intervention would be encouraging those showing symptoms to rely on their emotional support systems. Finally, an example of tertiary intervention would be psychotherapy and medications, or both (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2018).

 In conclusion, PTSD is an issue that can affect anyone exposed to trauma. It is important to get help and seek treatment after a traumatic event. Sandrine Shaw in the Netflix series Collateral was a fictional example of something that happens to thousands of women and men in the military. Experiencing a traumatic event can cause difficulty expressing emotions, insomnia, substance abuse, physical issues and more.

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