

A Social Psychological Perspective on Trauma and Trauma Disorders

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Grand Rounds 2/7/24

Disclosures

- No disclosures with regards to today's presentation

Goals and Objectives

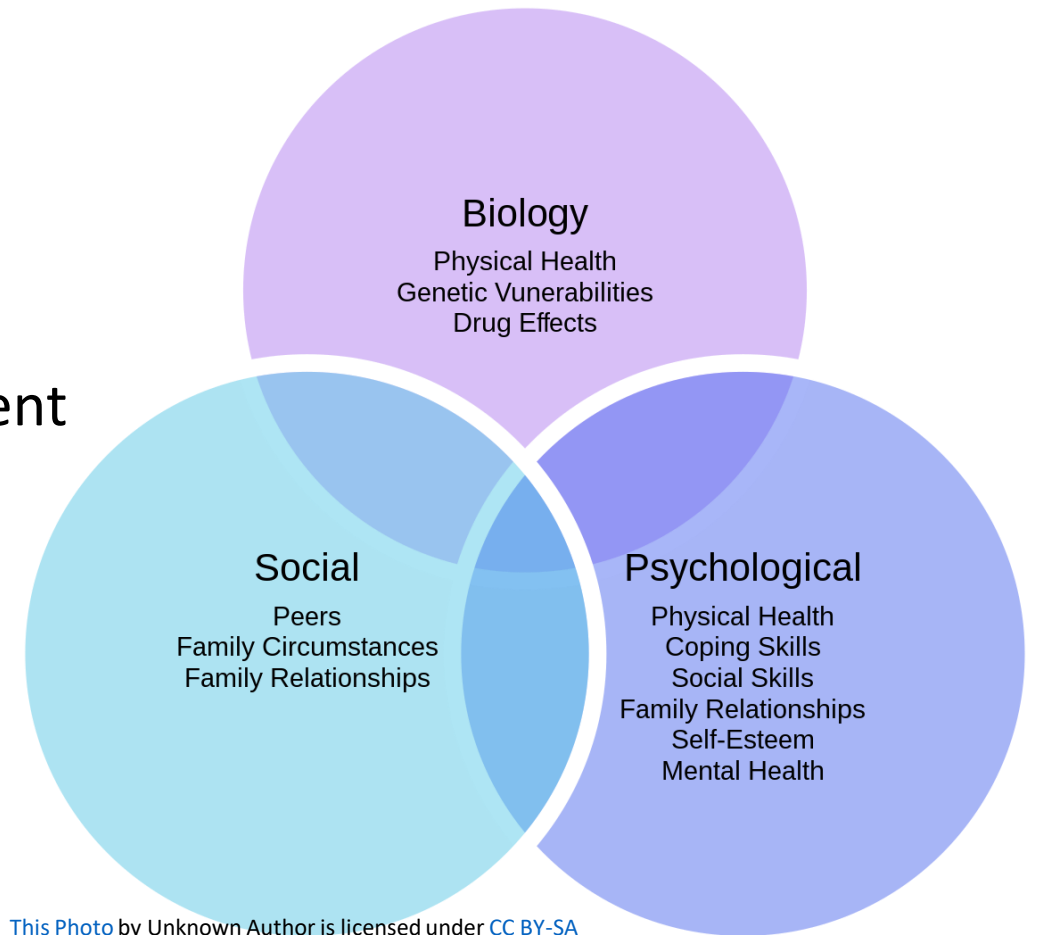
- Identify how sociological and cultural forces have framed the understanding of trauma and trauma disorders
- Discuss how past experiences, previous generations' experience, and cultural interpretations influence an individual's reaction to a traumatic event
- Describe social support and social identity as factors that can exacerbate the experience of trauma but that can also be protective.

Introduction

- Worldwide, more than 70% of adults will experience at least one stressful, “traumatic” event in their lives
- Many respond with an initial acute stress reaction or increased anxiety
- For many this remits spontaneously over a few months
- A small group of these will have more persistent decreased functionality

Introduction

- Biological
- Psychological
- Social
 - Type of event and social framing of the event
 - Social identity
 - Social support



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Defining Trauma

- Medical definition (dictionary.com): “A body wound or shock produced by sudden physical injury, as from violence or accident”
- Psychological definition (dictionary.com): “an experience that produces psychological injury or pain”
- In both definitions, the event itself is important but so is the impact on the person experiencing it

History

- “Traumatic neurosis” and “railway spine”
 - Mid-late 1800s railway and industrial accidents **without** physical injury
- “Shell shock”
 - WWI, episodes of blindness, deafness and muteness without organic cause

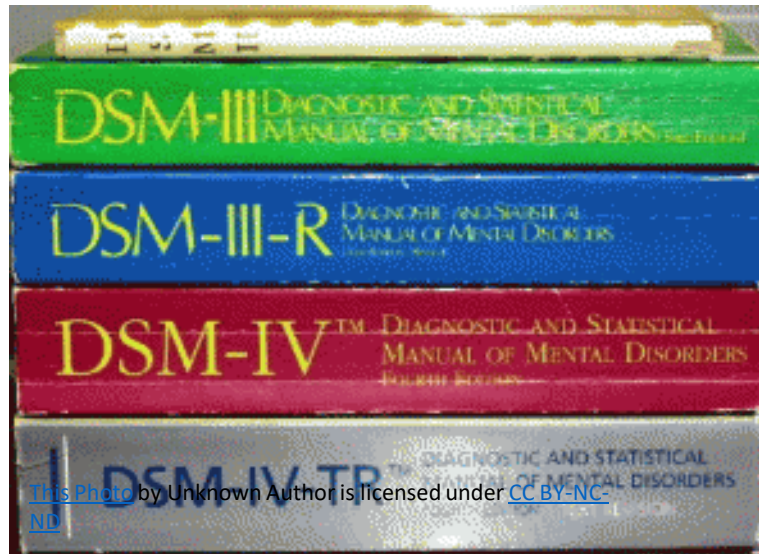


History

- Kardiner
 - WWII era American psychiatrist
 - Symptoms result of an adaptation when the psychological resources needed to process an event were greater than what the individual could muster at the time

History

- DSM III
 - PTSD first introduced
 - Personality and risk factors less important than the severity of the experience
 - “Outside the range of usual human experience”
 - Allowed for restitution in the form of ongoing service-connected disability for Vietnam-era veterans



DSM-V

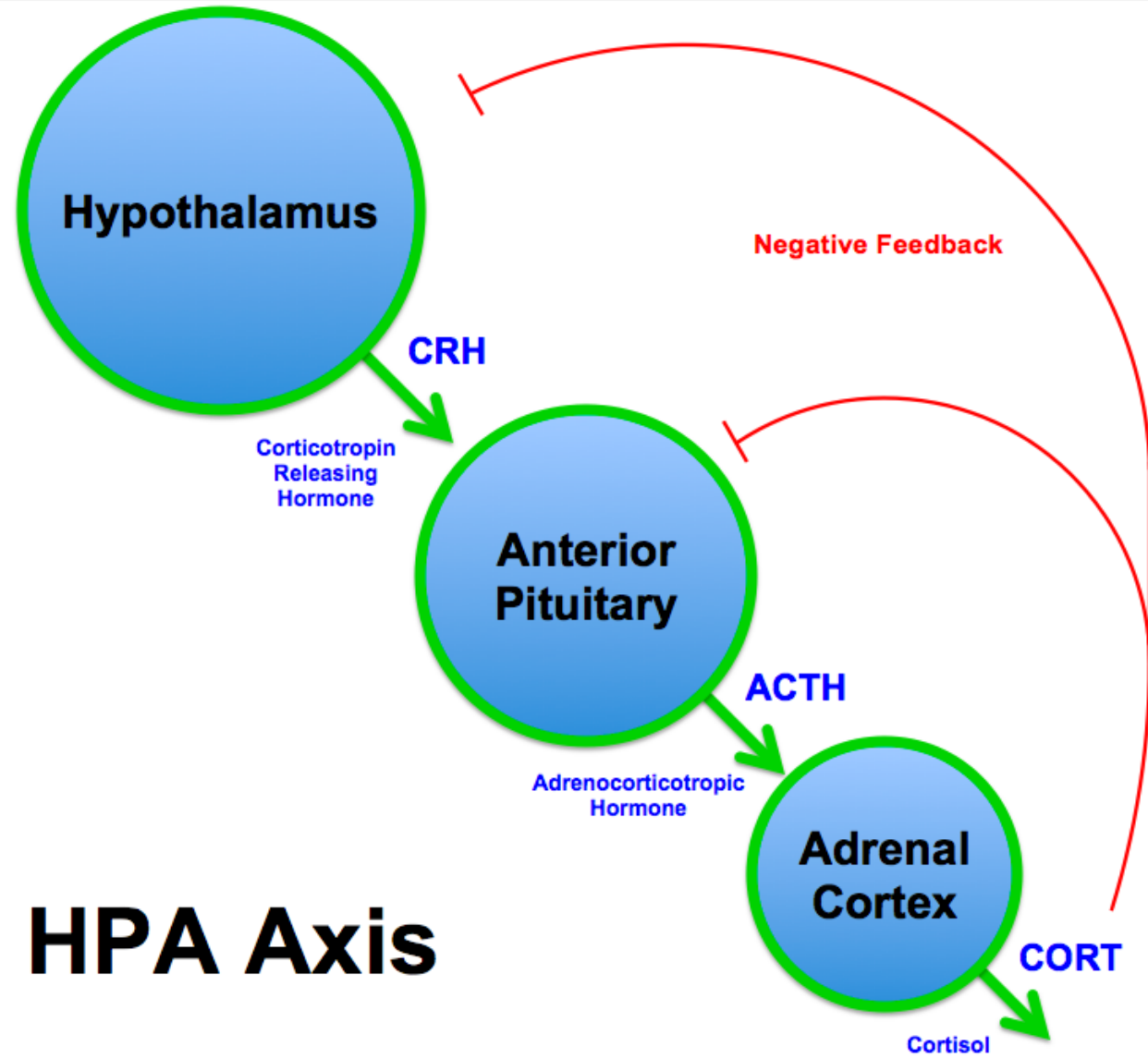
- Event must have exposed the individual to “actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence”
- Indirect exposure to the event: limited to learning an event has occurred to a close family member or friend, or repetitive exposure to images/media through work
- Otherwise, “exposure through electronic media, TV, movies, or pictures” is excluded

DSM-V

- 4 major symptom groups
 - Re-experiencing the event
 - Avoidance of thoughts or triggers
 - Increased sense of current threat
 - Mood symptoms
- 20 possible symptoms, with at least 1 or 2 required from each of the 4 categories

Biological Bases of PTSD

- Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA axis)
 - Responsible for the stress response (cortisol)
 - Low basal cortisol levels at time of experiencing trauma associated with PTSD
 - unopposed catecholamine surge and stimulation of sympathetic nervous system
- Fear and memory circuitry
 - Smaller hippocampal volume
 - Increased amygdala activation
 - Decreased medial prefrontal cortex activation



HPA Axis

Psychological Factors

- Dissociation has long been observed and studied as a reaction to trauma
- Maladaptive defense mechanism for proceeding with day-to-day life
- Memory disturbances, alterations in consciousness, splits in identity, depersonalization and derealization
- Painful traumatic components of memories are split off and compartmentalized

Dissociation

- Failure to adequately integrate the traumatic memory into one's self-concept
- The painful memory may remain hidden or surface in distressing and intrusive flashbacks
- Dissociative symptoms during and after a dangerous event increases risk of PTSD

Sociological Perspective on Trauma

- Events are given meaning by cultural and social interaction
- Dangerous or traumatic events are framed and defined socially
- Type of event
 - Environmental vs Interpersonal

Environmental Events

- An event which may destroy or injure individuals, their belongings, and their view of their social order
 - i.e. house fire, auto accident, volcano, flood, tsunami, pandemic
- With adequate resources and the opportunity to rebuild, most people regain their psychological integrity
- Prevalence of PTSD following this type of event is lower, less than 20% for auto accidents, as low as 10% for other types of industrial accidents, and in the 3-10% range for various natural disasters

Interpersonal Events

- Instances of suffering wrought deliberately by other human beings or groups of human beings
 - i.e. rape, robbery, assault, domestic violence, war
- Primary driver of PTSD symptomatology
- Prevalence rates of 33-50% on average
- Also the highest risk for acute stress disorder

Social Construction of Trauma

- Dangerous events are unpredictable and chaotic by nature and amplify existential anxieties / sense of meaninglessness
- Societies construct methods of predicting, mitigating, and explaining dangerous events
 - “God’s plan,” karma, etc
- Bhutanese torture survivors – few developed PTSD following imprisonment, believed their suffering came from bad karma

Social Construction of Trauma

- Group mindsets develop to mediate boundless violence
 - i.e. “rules of war,” killing of women and children evokes anxiety in a way that killing soldiers does not
- Attribution to the victim
 - Dehumanizing the victim or blaming the victim
- Belief in a political ideology protects against psychological effects of violence

Social Identity

- Construction of a group identity accentuates similarities and minimizes differences
- Characteristics of an individual related to group identity are seen as positive
- Those in other groups not possessing the same characteristics are seen as negative



Social Identity

- Positive effects on self-esteem, regardless of overall social standing of the group within the larger social structure
- Trust, support, and connection provide psychological resources
- These resources protect against effects of traumatizing events
 - Increased resilience
 - Decreased psychological distress
- Group identity can provide a “bird’s-eye-view”
 - Place value on the future of the group as a whole instead of individual suffering

Social Identity as a Risk for Trauma

- Group identity can put an individual at risk for discrimination spanning generations
 - Example of Native American historical trauma
 - Mass death, forced relocation, children forced to attend boarding schools
 - Forced “integration” with the dominant culture
 - Symptoms of dissociation, anger, numbing of emotions, and avoidance seen across generations
- Cycles of violence
 - Children of mothers who experienced the Rwandan genocide had increased rates of experiencing violence, instability, domestic violence, etc.

Multiple Social Identities

- Social identities range from race to gender to sexual orientation and more.
- Identities are intertwined
- “Double discrimination”
 - Example of LGBTQ POC reporting feeling alienated within their own groups
 - Multiple marginalized identities at increased risk

Social Support as Protective

- Social Support: Those aspects of individuals' relationships with others, and with communities as a whole, which contribute to the individuals' well-being.
- A protective factor against development of mental illness including PTSD, depression, anxiety, as well as general morbidity and mortality
- Formal group therapy session, institution of monetary or resource-based aid, or simply relying on presence of loved ones for comfort and emotional support
- Provide an outlet for expressing experiences and receiving assurance

Diathesis-Stress Model

- Stressors in the environment interact with biological and psychological characteristics of individuals
- This engenders an individualized response
- Traumatic events are significant stressors which are often responded to in maladaptive or debilitating ways at the individual level
- Social support can serve as a “buffer” to soften the impact of this type of event

Diathesis-Stress Model

- Individual stress response is influenced by:
 - Social networks
 - Social capital
 - Past social experiences
- Higher levels of perceived help following an event associated with better outcomes
- Environmental vs Interpersonal events: natural disasters are shared, collective events which garner more universal empathy and support

Social Support and Cognitive Processing

- Presence of social support can influence the way trauma is perceived in the moment
- fMRI studies – fear responses are dampened by physical touch and presence of loved ones
- Social relationships influence oxytocin activity and amygdala circuitry



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Individual Perceptions of Social Support

- Individuals who view their communities as less supportive to begin with may be at higher risk
 - Survey of individuals impacted by Hurricane Sandy
 - Those who reported a higher regard of the ability of hospitals and medical providers to cope with a large-scale disaster had better outcomes
- Perceived quality of support provided is more important than quantity
 - Supports that are viewed as more relevant to the situation are more protective

Timing of Social Support

- Timely implementation of supports and services are more protective
- Establishment of therapeutic support groups
- Assurances to survivors that they are not alone
- Minority groups or groups lacking political or social power tend to have fewer supportive resources available
 - Example of Mexican flood in 1999 – those already facing economic hardship prior to natural disaster faced a longer road to recovery compared to more privileged groups

Treatment Options for PTSD

- Medication
- Trauma-focused psychotherapy
- Prolonged exposure therapy
- CBT for PTSD
- Narrative exposure therapy
- EMDR
- **Social treatments and interventions**

Therapeutic Support Groups

- Forums where patients can interact with and learn from peers with similar conditions
 - In-person or online
- Environment where impact of stigma is less acutely felt
- Education
- Models for behavior and more effective coping

Peer Support Groups

- Example of online forums for US military veterans with PTSD
 - Participants reported these spaces were useful for discussing stigma, identifying with other members, learning to cope with conflict
 - Relative anonymity allowed for more frank discussion of fears, emotions, and desire to seek help



Social Support Interventions

- Directing patients to important resources like food, shelter, etc.
 - Making the burden community-wide rather than individual
- Debriefing and preventive psychoeducation exercises
 - Teaching stress management skills to first responders
 - Most effective of these interventions were those designed to reduce risk factors, for example teaching stress-reduction techniques or increasing physical exercise
 - Debriefing alone was not shown to reduce trauma symptom development

Recovery Narratives

- Recovery narrative: a way of thinking about a traumatic experience that integrates it with the rest of the community's life and identity
- Transform the experience over time into one which provides meaning and resilience to group members, rather than focusing on the destructive nature of the event itself
- Group members become more tightly united and more protected following collective trauma

Conclusion

- Not all dangerous or “traumatic” events result in the development of psychopathology
- This is due to biological, psychological, and **social** factors
- Our perception of trauma is socially constructed
- Social identity and social support modulate responses to these events and are potential sources of resilience

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