

# Acute Traumatic Stress & Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) In the General Population

By Carla Wills-Brandon

## Secondary Post Trauma Syndrome Symptoms

I have received numerous phone calls, emails and had face to face sessions with numerous folks over the years who are experiencing symptoms of Secondary PTSD from the wars

taking place in the Middle East and the natural disasters which have plagued us with hurricanes, fires, earthquakes and other acts of Mother Nature. Everyone asks, "AM I crazy?" or "Is there something wrong with me for feeling what I'm feeling? I turn on the television and I feel just awful." A few of the phone calls have come from individuals who are suddenly experiencing memories of past combat experiences, sexual abuse or physical violence. Hopefully the following article will help normalize feelings of distress during these difficult times.



## ALL TRAUMA SURVIVORS, RECOVERING INDIVIDUALS NEED TO TAKE NOTE!

Feeling overwhelmed with emotion. It is natural to feel feelings about the devastation a world conflict, war, hurricane or other disaster has produced for the victims and refugees, but extreme, uncontrollable feelings of rage, guilt, terror or grief are a concern. Normal compassion, anger, sadness and upset are human responses. But excessive feelings indicate that not only are feelings about "here and now" traumas being felt, but that this has triggered any past feelings related to past trauma or injustices. If this happens for you, start writing about the hurricane, the refugees, how you feel about it. Then write about any sexual, emotional, physical abuse you have endured. Include past war experiences, injustices, holocausts, poverty experiences. Then move on to writing about losses you have had.

1. Some people are dive into rescue work with victims, politics, and refugees and then finding they are paralyzed. This is called "over-identification." Trauma survivors often over identify with other victims of trauma - boundaries are lost. Once again, being with traumatized individuals can pull up past feelings of trauma for those who are trying to be of assistance. This can create a sense of not "rescuing" enough, or the sense of feeling paralyzed and guilty.
2. Survivor's Guilt appears to be a major problem for many. The sense is, "I'm fine - they aren't fine. I feel guilty because I'm not suffering." For those who have trauma history, this too is a normal response. Holocaust survivors who survived, gulag survivors who survived, vets who survived often experience this and it's been well researched. Those traumatized in the past who have survived trauma of any sort will feel Survivor's Guilt. So, if you are recovering from an addiction, have had a life threatening illness or if you have survived trauma, know Survivor's Guilt can visit you when you watch images of devastation and suffering on television.
3. Self righteousness counters feelings of guilt. There can be a great deal of angry finger pointing going on. Rage counters depression and a sense of helplessness. Discussion of what went wrong is normal, but trauma survivors tend to become very narrow in their arguments. The obsession with the argument distracts from the feelings at

hand. Comments like "We will agree to disagree" or "Let's see what pans out" or "I understand your point, but am not going to get into it" are good ways to defuse these situations. If you find yourself becoming narrow or obsessed in your arguments with others with regard to the devastation, begin writing about this. Ask how the argument or obsession impacts you directly. Try to discover your own triggers. I was with several individuals yesterday who were on emotional overload with regard to finger pointing and the emotion was more tied to the traumas they had survived in the past as opposed to current events. Be cautious of this.

4. The need to do more and more and more. The need to give more money, time or donations is another typical response. I can't tell you how many sexual assault victims have contact me, to inform me they were flying or driving to sites of devastation, when they themselves were in no position, emotionally or physically, to do so. Several of these individuals have reported sudden recall of past incidents of trauma and abuse or they were in the process of doing their own recovery work. Talk to others before making decisions such as this. Get a reality check.

Here are other symptoms of Secondary Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome

- Sudden depressions which feel overwhelming.
- An obsession with the news.
- Forgoing previous plans or routines to watch the news or programs on tragedies, world conflicts, wars and disasters.
- Too much time on line with media reports, mailing lists, blogs, devoted to these events.
- Sudden bouts of explosive rage.
- Feeling victimized even though you did not directly suffer loss from the event.
- Believing the world is an unsafe place.
- Difficulty getting out of bed.
- Forgoing self care, the gym, 12 step meeting, a food plan, needed medications, contact with children, appointments.
- Isolation.
- Nightmares - Not wanting to sleep.
- Medication with alcohol, prescription drugs, illegal substances, mood altering herbs.
- Irritation with spouse, children if time spent online blogging or listing about these events, or if watching the news, is interrupted.
- Sudden surfacing of sexual, physical or emotional abuse.
- Sudden surfacing of past trauma, war, participation in rescue missions for past devastations.

- Ignore present work on past experiences of devastation by saying, "My situation is not as bad as what I'm seeing on television."
- Assisting in the devastation without taking breaks, caring for the self.
- Over doing with regard to rescue or caretaking of refugees.
- Overwhelming sense of grief about past losses, deaths, divorces, etc.

It is important for individuals suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome to be cautious during these times. Know you can easily be swept up in current world conflicts and disasters and completely distracted from what it is you need to do to continue your own recovery. Children who have been traumatized in the past can also be impacted. Unfortunately, most children do not have the psychological maturity to be aware that the strong emotions they are having are related to the bombardment of media information triggering their own traumatic history. Watch for acting out. Turn OFF the television. When talking about such events with children, discuss war, natural disasters, and world conflicts in language that is age appropriate. Ask them how they feel about it. Find out if they are frightened or are feeling insecure. For those of you, who have worked on your past traumas, be aware that you must be balanced in your efforts to assist those impacted by war, natural or man mad disasters or world conflicts, otherwise you too could find yourself re-traumatized. Along with this, by being re-traumatized yourself, you are at risk for doing damage to those you are trying to serve.

For more information on this topic pick up a copy of Carla's book titled, "Learning To Say No: Establishing Healthy Boundaries."