

Call it What it is: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) From Life in Prison

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In 1842 Charles Dickens' book on his tour of the United States, *American Notes*, was published. One chapter, "Philadelphia, and its Solitary Prison" was devoted to the effects of the Pennsylvania System of Prison Management (solitary confinement) on prisoners.

On the haggard face of every man among these prisoners, the same expression sat. . . It had something of that strained attention which we see upon the faces of the blind and deaf, mingled with a kind of horror, as though they had all been secretly terrified. In every little chamber that I entered, and at every grate through which I looked, I seemed to see the same appalling countenance. It lives in my memory. . . . Parade before my eyes, a hundred men, with one among them newly released from this solitary suffering, and I would point him out. (Dickens, 1842/1957, pp. 108-109)

Solitary confinement is one of the worst things that can happen in prisons, but often the intensity of living in the general population of a prison produces what we now call PTSD. In the public mind, PTSD is associated with wartime combat. We sometimes remark on the parallels between war and corrections, as in the phrase "war on crime." Englehardt reported that:

In times of peace the prison is, of all institutions, the most representative of war conditions. . . [because] society has thought of itself as being engaged in perpetual warfare, the enemy being the violators of its legal, social, and economic codes. . . war suggests hatred, hostility, ruthlessness, and aggression. (American Prison Association's Proceedings, 1939, pp. 25-26)

Consistent with Dickens' report, some of the difficulties that can be encountered during and after incarceration are typically described with language designed for war conditions that often linger after the battlefield.

In the American Civil War this problem was described with three different terms, each of which emphasized some characteristics more than others. The first and most common was melancholia, "A functional mental disease, characterized by gloomy thoughtfulness, ill-grounded fears, and general depression" ("Melancholia," 1971/1973, p. 1763). The second most common term was hysteria, and it had a similar definition. "A functional disturbance of the nervous system, characterized by such disorders as anaesthesia, hyperanaesthesia, convulsions, enfeeblement or perversion of the moral and intellectual faculties ("Hysteria," 1971/1973, p. 1363). The third term was insanity, "The condition of being insane; unsoundness of mind as a consequence of brain-disease; madness, lunacy" ("Insanity" 1971/1973, p. 1445).

In World War I the same condition was called shell shock "(1916): 1. any of numerous,

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often hysterical psychoneurotic conditions appearing in soldiers under fire in modern warfare[.] shell-shocked (1918). . .2. mentally confused” (“Shell Shock,” 1988, p. 1085).

In World War II the problem was sometimes called:

Combat fatigue, also called battle fatigue, or shell shock, a neurotic disorder caused by the stress involved in war. This anxiety-related disorder is characterized by (1) hypersensitivity to stimuli such as noises, movements, and light accompanied by overactive responses that include involuntary defensive jerking or jumping (startle reactions), (2) easy irritability progressing even to acts of violence, and (3) sleep disturbances including battle dreams, nightmares, and inability to fall asleep. (“Combat Fatigue,” 2016, p. 1)

Surely similar psychological experiences must persist after cruel treatment: Japanese Americans confined in internment camps, Native Americans removed from their traditional territories to reservations, former slaves after they were freed. One case in point was during the Federal occupation of Confederate states during the American Civil War.

To many members of the Federal armies of invasion during the Civil War, the plight of the freedmen seemed hardly less distressing than that of the slave. Ignorant, homeless, ragged, and hungry, the Negroes by thousands flocked to the Union camps, creating grave problems of supply and sanitation and even hampering military movements. General Benjamin F. Butler, who first ‘confiscated’ the escaping slaves as ‘contraband of war,’ not only employed the Negroes as laborers but also established relief stations and schools for them.” (Swint, 1966, p.1)

It is central to the work of prison education and reentry that teachers and other caregivers become aware of the trauma from being exposed to treatment that is deliberately designed to hurt people. The intensity of the pain varies among nations, but prisons always hurt people. Even when the immediate experience of being hurt is removed, persons exposed to pain tend to be dislocated and unsettled, without sufficient nurture or support, terrified, and confounded. We have many terms to describe these problems when they are encountered in war, and we have to extend those original meanings to include the incarcerated and the recently released. We can still express the idea by calling it what it is in our current language: post-traumatic stress disorder.

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