

THE INFLUENCE OF POSTTRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER OF WAR VETERANS ON THE MENTAL STATUS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNGER ADOLESCENTS

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SUMMARY

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a spectrum disorder whose symptoms show psychological, neurobiological dysregulation and poorer functionality of a person on the social plane. PTSD characteristics are symptoms from four clusters: symptoms of intrusiveness, avoidance, negative changes in cognition and mood and changes in excitability and reactivity. Traumatic experiences of war veterans can have an impact on the development of psychopathology in their children's lives. The impact of posttraumatic stress disorder of war veterans is negatively manifested in a broader sense through secondary traumatization and is manifested differently in relation to the period of childhood and adolescence. The period of childhood and adolescence represents a delicate and dynamic period that requires adaptation and functionality in adulthood. The epidemiological studies so far indicate the link between the post-traumatic stress disorder of war veterans with the mental problems of their children.

Key words: post-traumatic stress disorder - PTSD - war veterans - mental status – children - younger adolescents - Bosnia and Herzegovina

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INTRODUCTION

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a spectral disorder whose symptoms show psychological, neurobiological dysregulation and poorer functionality of the person at the social level (Anonymous 1994). The complexity of posttraumatic stress disorder is manifested in the interaction between genetic, epigenetic, psychological, environmental, moral and spiritual factors that contribute a better understanding of the transmission of trauma to children (Yahuda & Bierer 2009, Bruning 2018). PTSD is characterized by symptoms from four groups:

- symptoms of intrusion;
- avoidance symptoms;
- symptoms of a negative change in cognition and mood;
- symptoms of excitation and reactivity change (DSM-5 2013).

The symptoms of PTSD in parents can have a devastating transgenerational effect on the mental health of children (Davidson & Mellor 2001). Children of parents suffering from war PTSD can strive to understand and empathize with them through their feelings and behaviors (Dekel & Monson 2010). The symptoms of parental PTSD can be passed on to children leading to children having symptoms of PTSD and this is known as “secondary traumatization” (Canfield 2014). Symptoms associated with secondary trauma may cause or worsen mental status of the child in an effort to combat it. Secondary traumatization in children of parents with PTSD can manifest as increase in anxiety, behavioral and emotional problems, symptoms of stress

(Dinshtein et al. 2011). Impact of posttraumatic stress disorder of war veterans is negatively manifested in a broader sense through secondary traumatization and is manifested differently in relation to the period of childhood and adolescence (Boričević Maršanić et al. 2014a). The period of childhood and adolescence represents a sensitive and dynamic period that requires adaptation and functioning solutions in adulthood (Wenar & Kerig 2006). Previous epidemiological studies indicate an association between posttraumatic stress disorder of war veterans with mental problems, and behavioral problems and emotional problems of their children (Klarić et al. 2008, Zalihić et al. 2008, Hasanović 2011, Selimbašić et al. 2012, Boričević Maršanić et al. 2014b, Krešić Ćorić 2016, Selimbašić et al. 2017). Children of parents who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder show problems in the contact they have with male family members and show dissatisfaction with the contacts they have with their fathers and male persons in the family (Selimbašić et al. 2009).

The aim of this paper was to determine the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on the children and young adolescents whose fathers are war veterans.

SUBJECTS AND METHOD

A group of 120 school children and younger adolescents (10-15 years old) from the area of Tuzla Canton was analyzed. Their fathers are war veterans, who had experiences of war traumas and who show symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder after the war 1992-1995 in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

For assessment of the post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms severity of fathers who are war veterans, Harvard Trauma Questionnaire-Version for Bosnia and Herzegovina and ICD-10-R was used. To assess children and the younger adolescent: Strength and Difficulty Questionnaire (SDQ) - parental assessment for behavioral problems and emotional difficulties, Impact Event Scale (IES) for the posttraumatic stress reactions and the Neuroticism and Extraversion Scale (Hanes) for the assessment of neuroticism and extraversion were used.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study of 120 school children and young adolescents whose fathers suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder aged 10 to 15 years in Bosnia and Herzegovina from the area of Tuzla Canton, I find that their children show behavioral problems, problems with peers, emotional difficulties, hyperactivity / impulsivity, increased neuroticism and elevated level of subjective stress. Children and young adolescents of war veterans with PTSD had significantly higher mean values of neuroticism than children of war veterans without PTSD and significantly lower mean values of social abilities and extraversions. Studies by Klarić et al. (2008), Zalihić et al. (2008) Krešić Ćorić et al. (2016) and Selimbašić et al. (2012, 2017) indicated the presence of serious behavioral and emotional problems of children whose fathers are war veterans. However, there is a lack of clarity in the literature on how direct and indirect influences of war PTSD of parents manifest on their children's mental health (Creech & Misca 2017). It cannot be stressed any further how much the "toxic" effects of parental trauma influence family members, and children and younger adolescents who are the most vulnerable part of that population. Difficult adjustment can be manifested in the immediate behavior and experience of the child, but it may also have a so-called "sleeping effect". Research on war veterans and their families from different countries and from earlier periods have documented a strong association between PTSD problems and family relationships, for a long time. Boričević Maršanić et al. (2014a) in a quantitative study examined emotional symptoms and behavior, parent-adolescent attachment, and family functioning in the clinical examined offspring of Croatian war veterans with PTSD. Children of war veterans with PTSD report twice as many internalized and externalized problems. Somatic and anxiety / depressive symptoms are increased in children of war veterans. Increasing psychopathology among the aforementioned children of war veterans with PTSD may be due to long-term treatment. Dinshtein, Dekel and Polliack (2011) in their research support the arguments regarding increased potential for secondary traumatization in children of war veterans with PTSD and indicate that they had greater emotional

difficulties than members of the control group in certain domains. Adult children and adult veterans with PTSD experience higher level of distress, a higher level of avoidance, intrusion and intimacy. Sullivan et al. (2016) considers that those veterans with high PTSD symptoms were more likely to report inadequate functioning of child; female veterans were more likely to report inadequate child function than male veterans. In this study, parental PTSD symptoms were associated with internalization problems, but not with symptoms of externalization in children. Veterans pointed to the strong desire to communicate with children about PTSD, but also indicated that communication was a major challenge and problem for them (Sherman et al. 2015). Results of another study found an association between the impact of specific PTSD clusters of war veterans in performing parental roles (Creech & Misca 2017). Lester et al. (2010) in a study of the families of soldiers and marines from the United States identified problems in behavior as well as emotional problems in children age from 6 to 12. Lester et al. (2016) in the group of parents who are in the active and reserve service found a small but significant association between the strength of the military parental PTSD and separation anxiety in preschool children, as well as increased emotional and behavioral problems of school-age children. Study by Herzog et al. (2011), determined moderate association of parental PTSD with internalized but not with externalized problems in children and that the symptoms of parents with PTSD are mediators of secondary traumatization symptoms.

CONCLUSION

Post-traumatic stress disorder in war veterans has a strong impact on the mental status of their children and younger adolescents. There is a strong association with behavioral problems, emotional difficulties, distress and stress reactions, neuroticism in children and younger adolescents. Post-traumatic stress disorder of war veterans who are parents-fathers a strong predictor for development of psychopathological symptoms in children and young adolescents. Children and young adolescents are under increased risk of developing psychopathological symptoms in adulthood due to secondary traumatization.

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