

Introduction

Understanding Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): An Overview

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Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) has been recognized for more than 100 years under a variety of labels such as nervous shock, compensation neurosis, shell shock, and war neurosis. However, the disorder was not officially categorized among the diagnostic nomenclature until 1980 when it was introduced in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Third Edition. Because of the relatively recent recognition of PTSD as a formal disorder, critical issues in PTSD research, such as predictors of failure to recover from trauma, underlying biological mechanisms, and the development and evaluation of effective treatments, are just beginning to be fully addressed. There is growing awareness, among both physicians and the public, of PTSD as a serious and debilitating medical condition that affects not only war veterans and disaster victims but also as many as 1 in 12 adults in the general population at some time in their lives.

That PTSD incidence and prevalence rates vary widely according to the nature of the traumatic event, individual circumstances, and personal traits is now well documented. Nevertheless, PTSD represents a significant burden in terms of illness chronicity, frequency of comorbid mental disorders, health care resources, and overall cost to society. The considerable unmet need that exists for effective pharmacologic treatments can be met only by continued and rigorous investigation into the pathophysiologic processes and other factors that contribute to the destructive reactions to stressful life events that characterize PTSD.

This collection of articles brings together knowledge and opinion from a distinguished international faculty of experts in the world of psychiatry to produce a comprehensive overview of current understanding regarding PTSD. The important considerations and key issues highlighted in these proceedings formed the basis of a series of presentations delivered during a 2-day advisory board meeting held in March 1999 in Cannes, France. The event provided a forum for discussion of issues and trends relating to several aspects of PTSD, including diagnosis, epidemiology, findings of biological and neuroimaging studies, and current and future management strategies. The important issue of why such a large proportion of this patient population does not present for treatment is addressed, and the burden of PTSD in different populations, countries, and cultures considered.

The advisory board meeting "Understanding Posttraumatic Stress Disorder" was held March 8–9, 1999, in Cannes, France, and was supported by an unrestricted educational grant from Janssen-Cilag.