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COVID-19 PANDEMIC LIKELY TO LEAVE MANY SOUTH AFRICANS TRAUMATISED

Challenge posed by post-traumatic stress syndrome requires urgent addressing

Experiencing some traumatic stress is an inescapable part of life and few of us are completely untouched by it. The current COVID-19 pandemic however has introduced a great deal of additional uncertainty in our lives, likely to leave many vulnerable people traumatised. The fallout brought about by the pandemic has resulted in additional potential for traumatic experience, including the stress of a loved one who becomes ill and needs hospitalisation, having to live in

isolation from family and friends, or having a relationship fail under the strain caused by uncertainty and fear. For others, the traumatic stress may be caused by ongoing financial hardships, such as being retrenched and further anxiety about the illness.

Most people experience some degree of distress after a traumatic event, or a period of trauma in their lives as they try to come to terms with it, but after a period of a few weeks or months, most tend to recover from the shock and don't necessarily

develop lasting mental health difficulties as a result of it.

However, a sizable number of people – between 18% and 25% – experience severe ongoing symptoms in the months or years following such an event or period of trauma. When symptoms last longer than four weeks, it may indicate a deeper level of psychological distress known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. PTSD severely disrupts mental health and can substantially restrict the person's ability to function. PTSD

presented a major challenge to our mental healthcare system even before the COVID-19 pandemic, which is believed to only exacerbate the incidence of PTSD. We will therefore need to pay much greater attention to this condition as a nation going forward. Each person's response to traumatic situations is highly complex and unique. Certain individuals may be so sensitive to trauma they may even experience news footage they see on television as deeply disturbing. It's not always easy to establish who is most at risk of developing PTSD, but individuals who experienced a great deal of trauma early on in their childhood have been shown to be particularly vulnerable to being re-traumatised later in life and suffer ongoing PTSD symptoms.

Many individuals are unfortunately faced with not just one traumatic experience in their lifetime, but several. The South African Stress and Health [SASH] study survey found that 56% of respondents had experienced more than one trauma. Multiple traumatisation or ongoing re-traumatisation, can occur over a long period of time and can have a devastating impact on their lives. Other individuals who may be at high risk of PTSD

are those who are continually exposed to ongoing traumatic situations in their line of work, such as paramedics, nurses and other healthcare workers working at the frontline of the pandemic. Unfortunately there remains a widespread ignorance about PTSD and sometimes stigma attached to those who seek professional

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help. Some people still have the attitude that we should be able to deal with our traumatic experiences ourselves. Often times the response to a stressful event is 'I'm fine' as many feel compelled to carry on as though what happened was normal, and fail to acknowledge its immense impact. As a result, many people with PTSD are not diagnosed and suffer the consequences of their

trauma in silence, which can be very detrimental to their lives.

PTSD can be difficult to diagnose as it is an exceptionally complex condition that can mimic other mental health conditions. PTSD is often not diagnosed or is misdiagnosed by family medical practitioners. An additional complicating factor is that trauma can also have a significantly negative impact on other existing psychological conditions such as Depression, Anxiety and Bipolar Disorder that a person may already be experiencing. So what could be indications that a patient has PTSD? Many trauma survivors avoid talking about what happened, feel emotionally numb when they think about the trauma, and withdraw from contact with other people. Other symptoms may include Depression, Anxiety disorders, drug dependency, distressing thoughts and memories of the traumatic event, sleeping difficulties, guilt, and hyper-alertness to any signs of danger. PTSD can be diagnosed and successfully treated by a multi-disciplinary team of healthcare practitioners, including psychiatrists and psychologists, who are experienced in the management of the condition. They will work to assist the individual to regain a sense of



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control over their lives.

Patients suffering from PTSD usually require long-term treatment that may include a combination of medical treatments and therapies to assist in their recovery. A psychiatrist may prescribe medication to assist in managing symptoms such as Depression and Anxiety. One-on-one psychotherapy with a Psychologist experienced in the treatment of mental trauma, as well as group therapy sessions, have also shown good results. Human beings in general have a remarkable capacity to adapt to the most extreme stressors and tend to have reserves of strength. There is a most extraordinary strength in the human spirit but sometimes patients may need professional help and support to 'take back' their lives. Humans should not be afraid to acknowledge this to themselves and seek such assistance, particularly during this challenging time.

Tips to assist those who have suffered a trauma, or a number of traumas:

- Seek support from trusted people, such as friends and family: Persons with good support systems tend to cope better with traumatic experiences.
- Be kind: Keep in mind that the trauma was not anyone's fault and that the patient dealt with

it in the best way possible under the circumstances.

- The patient needs to be honest with themselves: Is the patient really okay or could they benefit from professional assistance and support? If the latter, find the necessary help.
- Make use of trauma debriefing and counselling services that may be available, for example through employer staff wellness programmes, even if it is thought that you/

the patient are relatively unaffected.

- Try avoid bottling up the experience and isolating: This is a fairly common response to severely traumatic experiences. Consider finding a trauma support group if the patient thinks they would benefit from sharing their experiences with others who have had similar experiences.
- Try to develop positive coping strategies to assist in dealing with the traumatic event and see how they may possibly learn from it. In other words, patients may be able to frame the event in a more positive manner so that it may contribute to their personal development and growth.
- Should you be concerned that a patient have been severely traumatised, seek the assistance of mental healthcare professionals who are experienced in diagnosing and treating mental trauma.
- Ensure that symptoms related to traumatic experiences, or to pre-existing psychological conditions, such as Depression and Anxiety, are appropriately treated. **MHM**

References available upon request

