

THE VIETNAM VETERAN AS A DISASTER VICTIM

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The introduction of the term post traumatic stress disorder in the DSM III has been one of the most important recent conceptual advances for clinicians working with victims of overwhelmingly stressful events. It has brought together a seemingly disparate collection of diagnostic entities including the post disaster syndrome, war neurosis, battle fatigue, K.Z. syndrome and P.O.W. syndrome and highlights the ubiquity of the emotional responses which individuals manifest when faced by such extraordinary traumas. Its main diagnostic points are the presence of a stress outside the range of normal experience, a subsequent psychic numbing and reduced involvement with the external world in parallel with a persistent re-experiencing of the trauma, and an associated cluster of dysphoric and autonomic symptoms.

Although the concept and clinical description grew out of work by Lifton, Shatan, Bourne, Horowitz and Figley on Vietnam veterans, it has direct relevance to survivors of natural disasters. I have been struck by the marked similarity of the symptomatology, emotional responses and coping skills employed by both the Vietnam veterans and Granville train crash survivors that I have had in therapy. From this perspective it could be argued that the 50,000 Australian Vietnam veterans constitute the survivors of the largest man made disaster in the past quarter century of our history. A disaster which took 494 lives, injured or maimed 2,398 and has left a steadily growing legacy of psychopathology.

Four commonly described features of a disaster are

- a) a high level of psychological stress accompanied by a fear of death and annihilation
- b) a sense of powerlessness
- c) the arbitrary and inexplicable nature of the event which leaves the individual grasping for a meaning behind what has occurred and
- d) a sense of guilt at surviving.

Each of these features can be applied directly to the experiences of Vietnam veterans. As well as the stress engendered by witnessing the horrendous injuries and deaths caused by mines, sniper fire and primitive booby traps, there was a constant and pervasive sense of threat in that the soldier could never feel entirely safe, not even in camp or while on leave nor could he ever be sure who the enemy was. In addition to these obvious threats, there were the more mundane stresses of a totally alien culture, a harsh and inhospitable climate and the risk of