

RUNNING HEAD: PTSD: Military?

PTSD: Not Just A Military Disorder

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How is mental illness defined? For people that are not in health professions, then that definition comes from what they see. The media. Media is loved by many people and media has gotten better when tackling hard subjects such as mental illness, but, sadly, media can give these people the wrong definition. They define mental illness as a debilitating disorder that makes a person dangerous to society. People with mental illnesses are 'crazy'. Anxiety is reduced to simply not liking crowds, depression is a synonym for sadness, and post-traumatic stress disorder is only shown in the military.

Post-traumatic stress disorder, abbreviated PTSD, is a mental disorder that occurs when a person has experienced or witnessed a traumatic event. Hence the word trauma. This can be anything traumatic to a person. It can be a car crash, natural disaster, sexual harassment/assault, military action/combat, abuse, etc. PTSD is not tied down to one specific act of trauma as the media has made many people believe. It is all of these scenarios and more. One person may go hunting and be traumatized by their family member killing an animal, but that family member is not traumatized. It's different for everybody and it's a hard thing to be told that your trauma does not matter because you were not in the military.

When PTSD is mentioned to people, they most likely think of the military. One would not say that the men and women in the military globally do not experience trauma, but they are the only ones that are shown to experience it. For civilians, their trauma is reduced to anxiety or a panic disorder. According to a study released from Drexel University in an article by *PsychCentral.com* stated, "the number of civilians suffering from PTSD is 13x more than military personnel". Thirteen times more. Is that because these military personnel have a tough exterior and do not tell anybody about what they are experiencing? Maybe, but it's also because this is not something that can be only given to a specific group of people.

Another misconception of PTSD is that it has to be physical, but that is also not the case. Witnessing or hearing something traumatic to oneself or a close friend or family member can be just as traumatizing as actually being in a traumatic moment. One could be told by a friend that that friend has suicidal thoughts and thinks about attempting it. That would be traumatic for them. Emotional trauma can have the same impact as physical trauma. There is this one woman who was emotionally abused by her father when she was a kid. She has developed PTSD from this. She has night terrors, she has triggers, but her trauma is not considered real in the eyes of society. She did not earn that trauma in combat. This is where people become shocked; being in combat does not mean one will develop PTSD and being in non-active combat does not mean one will not develop PTSD. To be clear, a soldier in combat could develop PTSD or they could not just like a civilian's chances are. A soldier that doesn't see action on the field could still develop post-trauma or not. It depends on how the person copes with the trauma they endured and if they let that trauma out in a healthy way.

As stated earlier, the media has a part to play in this misconception. There are four shows where this comes to mind: *Rambo*, *Last Man Standing*, *Stranger Things*, & *Thank You for Your Service*. Each of these shows/movies play on a different thought of PTSD from a military perspective.

Rambo was filmed in 1982, so the data they had on post-traumatic stress can be forgiven. It was just being researched back then because of soldiers returning from WW2, Korean War, and the Vietnam War and how they were affected by the trauma they endured. As most know, Rambo was tortured while in the Vietnam War and in the first movie he is triggered and has flashbacks. Now, this does happen to people with this disorder, but *Rambo* is one of the first movies that contributed to the association of PTSD to the military.

Tim Allen's show *Last Man Standing* is controversial because of Allen's views on politics, religion, family structure, and people are shown in his show because he is playing himself in his character. One can find humor in this show, but there are multiple instances where one character, Ed Azalte, is teased for only being a bookkeeper in the war that he served in with the Army. He talks about the dangers he saw, but he is not taken seriously because he did not see any action. This points to the statement earlier where no action, no trauma is seen to be believed. This character could have trauma due to seeing friends in action and getting hurt. This happens in real life and not just to soldiers, but real people as well.

Stranger Things on Netflix deals with many heavy-handed topics: coming out in the '80s, single parenthood, child abuse, bullying, but in season two, post-traumatic stress disorder came into the show. One of the main characters, Will Byers, is dealing with what happened to him in season one. He was kidnapped by a monster from an alternate dimension and almost died. Season two picks up with him having visions, but they are called flashbacks and his mom takes him to the hospital. The doctor calls it PTSD and he's not wrong in his diagnosis based on the symptoms that Will was experiencing. There's good and bad in this situation. The good is that Will is a normal kid. He was not in the military and he experienced heavy trauma and PTSD developed. This shows that normal people can have this disorder. The bad is that Hopper, a cop in the show and protector of the kids in the show, tells Will's mom that PTSD is real and that he's seen it in soldiers. A show that is filmed in 2016 did good and bad on the definition of PTSD and who could get it, but Hopper's comment makes Will and his friends seem like soldiers against the supernatural in this season and so the concept of normalcy in PTSD is taken away.

As the media and society begin to understand how mental illness and post-traumatic stress work, the people affected by these disorders are shown better in media. *Stranger Things* is

a good example of this, but so is *Thank You for Your Service*. This is a movie that was filmed in 2017 and it was a great example of PTSD. It did deal with soldiers, but it also dealt with their spouses. These soldiers are not the only people being affected by the military. Their spouses have to wait at home for them to come home or get a knock on the door. It's anxiety-producing and trauma-inducing situations. The soldier and his/her spouse show how PTSD can affect anybody. There is one instance where one soldier is playing a shooter game and the game plus ambience noise triggers him and he goes into a rage and forgets who his wife is. He chases her down their hallway and she locks him out of their bedroom for the night. When he comes back to his senses, he apologizes and she says that they are getting help.

There was also one scene where the main character, a soldier, is sitting in the VA with the soldier in the above paragraph and they are filling out paperwork to get help for the trauma. They see that they would have to wait almost a year before they could see a therapist. They are sitting in their seats when the main character says this, "Looks like you have to have your legs blown off to get help around here." These men worked with IUDs, bombs, in this movie, which is based on a true story, so they had seen action during their war. They had seen friends die. They had experienced trauma, but because it couldn't be seen and was mental and not in appearance, their suffering was not seen by others. This is true for real-life people.

People with scars are shown to have come out of a traumatic situation, but not all scars are visible. There are scars on the insides of us. Trauma can leave a physical or mental scar on us, but the stress afterward will always be psychological. These people will be haunted by flashbacks or go into a panic by a word that triggered a memory or a feeling. Earlier, a woman was mentioned and she had experienced emotional abuse as a child and now has PTSD, but she is engaged to a man that is in the military and he is diagnosed with military-related PTSD. When

she was asked how it made her feel to see how PTSD is shown in media and the message is sent to her she had this to say, "It's non-existent. It's an outlier that most people forget or avoid. The hardest thing in my relationship is that his military-related trauma makes mine feel smaller or less important. It makes me feel inferior for talking about my problems because they aren't as horrific as his".

This is a regular feeling for men and women, boys and girls, that have experienced trauma but aren't in the military. They feel as if their trauma is nothing compared to what these soldiers have seen and been through. It's harder when one has a spouse that is in the military because it's known that they have trauma, even if they do not say it, because the civilian spouse does not know how to help them or themselves from the trauma which can make it worse. These people believe that their trauma is not real and that they do not have the right to feel the way they do. This is the message that the media has put on defining post-traumatic stress disorder by communicating that it is only a military disorder.

As stated earlier, society is slowly becoming more aware of the stigma surrounding mental illnesses. People are standing up for how forms of media address topics of mental illnesses in media. Soon, hopefully, people will become more aware that PTSD is not just a combat-related military disorder. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder affects people from all walks of life: white or black, male or female, disabled or abled, Asian, Puerto-Rican, Christian, Muslim, Jew, or Atheist, learning disabled or gifted. PTSD does not care who develops this, but society should care. Society should still support our military men and women that suffer from this disorder, but it should not allow the rest of its citizens to suffer without any help because media has created a mindset that people that have experienced a car crash, natural disaster, sexual harassment/assault, or abuse cannot have real trauma. This is **real** for them.

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Anonymous woman in the story who gave me her feelings about PTSD in the media and let me quote her