

How to respond to railroad employees suffering from post-traumatic stress?

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Introduction

For eight years, I worked in countries in conflict as a war surgeon and as a medical coordinator for the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC). I visited political prisoners in jail and helped a significant number of people who had been exposed to traumatizing events. As such, I have witnessed firsthand the severely impeding and damaging physical and psychological consequences suffered months or years following the exposure to a traumatic event. Sadly, in most cases the techniques and means used to treat Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are not efficient enough to enable people suffering from this disorder to find peace within and to return to a normal life.

In general

Railroad accidents happen in significant numbers in all countries and are mainly caused by two things: human error and accidents for which railroad employees cannot be blamed. Human error is often caused by stress, which in turn induces fatigue, nervousness, lack of attention and fear. It is a common problem which can be reduced by effective preventive measures. Accidents which are not caused by human error but by external forces (accidents involving pedestrians, animals, objects or vehicles, and so on), however, can only be down numbered by pure chance.

Whatever the cause of the accident may be, employees who have witnessed them are more often than not very shaken up, and need to be helped in order to minimize the adverse effects. There are several means to achieve this: a crisis response team will usually subject the employee to a psychological evaluation and prescribe a follow-up treatment, such as therapy, antidepressants, sleeping pills and/or anti-anxiety pills, cognitive and behavioral therapy, EMDR. The goal is of course to get the employee back to work with the usual efficiency, as soon as possible. Too often, however, these measures are only partially effective. In the weeks or months following the incident, the employee will eventually show signs of PTSD and suffer dire consequences on his physical and mental health.

PTSD affects 1 person out every 10 people, and is considered one of the top anxiety afflictions and health issues in the world. It develops after one has been exposed to a single or several traumatic events, such as experiencing a life-threatening situation, enduring severe bodily harm, or seeing another person die. In some cases, just witnessing a traumatic or violent scene is enough to develop PTSD. The symptoms usually occur within three months after the event, but they may also surface years later. People suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder can present any number of symptoms, such as reliving the scene with resulting high anxiety, avoidance, over excitement or weariness. Very often, they are haunted daily by their fear and

guilt. The attention deficiency that plagues them prevents them from doing their job properly and makes it even harder to return to a normal work life. Furthermore, it is a recognized fact that if untreated, this disorder will shorten their lives significantly. It seems clear that anyone exhibiting these symptoms cannot be expected to carry out any tasks which require the kind of attention and precision needed, for example, to drive a train. Furthermore, the process of returning to work quickly is often impeded by the side-effects suffered from the usual prescription drugs (sleeping pills, anti-depressants, anti-anxiety pills). The consequences of this can be disastrous for their personal and professional life, and can lead to increased absenteeism, which in turn increases the cost for any company employing them.

Current situation

There are three main groups of people who are affected by an accident: the victims, the culprits, and those who have witnessed the scene and its aftermath, among which the paramedics, the policemen, the firemen, and any other rescuers involved. It serves no purpose, however, to divide the people involved in three groups, since each person will be affected in her own way based on her experience, current state, and individual physical and mental characteristics. Regardless of the extent to which each person was involved in the accident or its aftermath, all have suffered a shock, gone through one or more emotions, and all will need to deal with these between now and the future. The same goes for the person who has been physically hurt and needs to be hospitalized.

The increased awareness that started a few decades ago, has prompted crisis response teams to be immediately set up after the accident, so that the persons involved can be « debriefed » and talk about what they saw, did or didn't do, and what they are feeling: sad, angry, scared, guilty, and so on. Furthermore, it gives the crisis response team the opportunity to let these people know that it is normal to feel emotional, vulnerable and discomforted for some time after an accident. Some people are numb, and refuse to talk about what happened. In such a case, the person will forego the debriefing and probably be advised to go on a holiday (maybe even paid for by the employer or the insurance company), so that she can rest, take care of herself and process what happened. She is usually also advised to seek help from her doctor or from a support group.

These first steps taken immediately are crucial, as is the follow-up mostly carried out by doctors. It usually consists of sessions during which the person is free to talk about what she went through and how she has been faring since, both physically and mentally. The person will be watched closely for substance abuse (alcohol, drugs, pills), which can occur in the months following the traumatic event, and she will be prescribed sleeping pills and perhaps anti-anxiety medication as a relief if the doctor deems it necessary. Certain types of anti-depressants may also be prescribed with some form of therapy. Another commonly used method is EMDR («Eye Movement desensitization and reprocessing").

All these methods have the same goal: to help the person in pain progressively come out of her state of shock and resume a normal personal and professional life as soon as possible. However, the fact that the results are not what one would have expected cast a dark shadow on these various measures. This explains why people involved in accidents remain, for the most part, weakened and sometimes incapable of resuming a normal life. As a consequence, their state becomes a financial burden for their employer, who will notoriously be subjected to increased absenteeism and recurrent human error.

The most important issue is the ignorance surrounding the crucial role played by emotions in the balance of our physical and mental health. If emotions are not experienced to the fullest extent, they remain trapped inside and create tension. If the tension subsists long enough, it will create a whole series of symptoms, such as: difficulty sleeping, restless interrupted nights, waking up tired and feeling tired all day or feeling a sudden urge to nap, difficulty concentrating and memory lapses, increased irritability and vulnerability, hair loss, lack of libido (sexual drive). When these signs are ignored, more obvious symptoms may manifest and threaten the physical and mental wholeness of the person. That is when illnesses, among which PTSD, appear. PTSD is far more common than statistics would have us believe. Firstly because the disorder appears after remaining latent for several months, thus escaping the initial evaluation done by the crisis response team, and secondly, because people suffering from the disorder hide it (from themselves and others) for fear of the consequences and of showing any signs of weakness...

The OGE (« The Reverse of Ego ») approach

One of the reasons I created the OGE concept and method was to offer people suffering from PTSD a way to reconnect with their joy of living, and to return to their life as it was before the traumatic event.

OGE was created 17 years ago to help people both individually and in groups to regain their autonomy, and to do away with their dependencies or anything else slowing them down in their personal or professional life. The foundation of OGE rests on the idea that as long as we don't live in the moment, we cannot truly experience our emotions, which creates tension that can then lead to stress (synonymous of longstanding tension) and eventually to illness.

The mind *as it is described here below*, is solely responsible for our pain, in that it

- cuts us off from being in the moment, by either projecting us in the future and making us feel apprehensive, anxious, scared, panicked or phobic, or by bringing us back to the past to make us feel regretful, guilty or remorseful,
- cuts us off from our emotions and prevents us from recognizing, feeling and expressing them, and
- cuts us off from our inner wisdom, our creativity and our inner core, which basically means from that it cuts us off from who we are.

The mind, also called the ego, makes judgments of value so that we eventually end up feeling either superior or inferior to others, thus cutting us off from our true Self and by extension, from others as well.

It is important to understand the difference between the mind and the brain: the latter allows us to reason, memorize experiences, make plans and develop strategies. The main difference resides in the fact that when we use our brain, our body is relaxed whereas when the mind is at work, we immediately become tense.

The OGE (« The Reverse of Ego ») method was born from the concept and rests on three main pillars, based on the definition of the mind above:

1. Silencing the mind (which is fundamental if we want to be able to move on to the next two pillars).
2. Recognizing, feeling, and expressing our emotions of joy, sadness and anger.

3. Reconnecting to our inner wisdom, our creativity and our inner core, meaning to who we are.

This method is modular and can be tailored to meet the specific needs of any individual or group. Through this method, individuals are given simple tools which they can use anytime, anywhere. Like any method, however, it requires consistency and a true desire to get better and live life to the fullest on both the personal and professional levels. This method allows the individual to open himself up to himself and to others.

Why use the OGE approach to help treat PTSD?

The biggest problem facing accident victims is that they feel emotional about what they went through but find that they can't do much about it. Crisis response teams, support groups, and the various forms of therapy all help them to talk about what happened and even to share how they feel (albeit more conservatively than in reality!), but rarely do they have the chance to *experience* these emotions completely. After a few weeks have gone by and the shock has subsided, the individual will all too often either be dropped from therapy or quit, even though the emotions are still there inside him, tightly controlled by the mind. Feeling better after having talked about it and confident that these emotions have been « handled », the individual will then go back to work , encouraged by his caretakers' confidence that it's time to move on and get past this, with no regard for the remaining tension and bottled up emotions the individual still feels in the face of the traumatic event. This "pep talk" will usually not be given right away, but rather a few weeks or months into the therapeutic follow-up. It will lead the individual to believe that he's overreacting and make him feel guilty for not having overcome this by now, after which he will have a tendency to suffer in silence, thus increasing the tension and aggravating the vicious circle he already finds himself in. That is how disorders, which stem from a traumatic event and not expressing the related emotions, appear. In the eyes of the world the individual is all better, when in fact he's just starting to suffer from a case of full-fledged PTSD.

In order to break this excessively painful vicious circle, it is most important that the individual give himself the chance to fully express his bottled up emotions of anger and sadness. Let it be understood that by "expressing", I mean experiencing these emotions to the fullest extent, not just talking about them! This, the individual will do on his own, to make himself feel better. The result will be the disappearance of his tension, which in turn will cause the disappearance of the disorder and symptoms partially listed herein.

On top of the help we provide individuals who suffer from illness or multiple ailments, our experience at OGE helping victims of assault (rape, attacks, beatings) and people who worked in war-torn countries, is crucial.

OGE can attend to individuals in various ways (www.oge.biz), but it is important to underline that it is in no way group therapy. Whether we accompany them in a workshop where the OGE method is practiced or in a seminar, it is always done with the utmost respect for the individual. Furthermore, OGE can train individuals within the company to be the go to people in case an employee experiences a traumatic event. This training is dispensed by people who have extensive experience with stress, and more specifically PTSD.

Prevention

Most accidents caused by human error are the result of stress. Stress induces fatigue, lack of concentration, fear and loss of motivation. All these problems can be largely reduced, by showing the employee simple tools he can use on a daily basis. To help prevent accidents and to optimize their performance, the OGE approach can deliver these useful tools to the employees.

Conclusions

PTSD disorders are far more frequent than statistics show, because they often appear much later than the individual's actual exposure to the traumatic event. The measures taken until now by companies to minimize the development of PTSD are a step in the right direction, but are insufficient because they do not give the individual the possibility to experience his emotion to the full extent. The OGE approach is modular, practical, and adapts to the specific needs of the people suffering from PTSD as well as those of the companies; it allows for a relatively speedy recovery of the employee, without the use of prescription drugs. The long-term costs suffered by companies can thus be strongly reduced, while still being able to see their employees' through a difficult time and benefitting again from their skills. The use of these simple tools also greatly improves prevention, and helps employees do their jobs as effectively as possible.