

Short Communication

Can Daily Social Events Become Trauma: An Individualistic Perspective

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In clinical practice of counseling or psychology, we often observed that when someone experienced a series of negative daily social encounters (such as bullying, unfair treatment, emotional neglect, betrayal, or discrimination), they could experience psychological distress, including partial or full symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorders (PTSD). Undoubtedly, most individuals have encountered adversity or mishap in the daily social interaction. While some manage these stresses constructively, others may be psychologically bothered or sink deeper into mental disorders such as anxiety, depression (the two most common mental disorders; [1,2]), or even suicide. Although mental disorder itself is non-fatal, it can bring extreme distress to individuals and families and thus bring turmoil to society.

Of course, one persisting question is whether certain negative daily encounters, which lead to psychological suffering, could be considered as traumatic experiences in the eyes of individuals? According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition (DSM-5), only people who experienced life threatening events (such as rape, other physical violence, accidents, or war) are considered to be experienced trauma and can be diagnosed with PTSD (APA, 2013) because single event of such trauma usually overwhelms a person's ability to cope [3,4]. Thus, trauma is defined by DSM-5 as events involving death/serious injury/sexual violation or threats of death/serious injury/sexual violation (violent/accidental), either experienced by the individual him/herself or occurring to a loved one and witnessed or learned of subsequently (APA, 2013). In this form of trauma, "intense" or "acute" are typical features of trauma as assessed by the DSM-5.

Besides this type of trauma, could there be other form of social events, which may be less intense and stressful than what is defined in DSM-5 but are perceived as traumatic by individuals? According to Oxford dictionary, trauma is defined as "an unpleasant experience that makes you feel upset and/or anxious." Prolonged stress over time can lead to wear-and-tear on the body and mind [5,6], and may in turn affect one's sense of control and ability to cope with stress. For example, Caston and Frazier found that perceiving less present and future control over an event that is actually more controllable was related to greater distress. Thus, based on the trauma definition

by Oxford dictionary, research findings, and our own observations, I believe that if negative daily social encounters occur repeatedly, continuously, or accumulatively, these encounters may be perceived by individuals as overwhelming and traumatic, regardless of their true nature. In comparison to trauma as defined in DSM-5, this type of trauma is admittedly not physical and objective but rather psychological and subjective. Thus, I call it subjective social trauma. It is trauma since it could lead to a spectrum of various psychological distress, from cynicism in attitudes to anxiety or depression or to more extreme cases of suicide or violence. The case of Adam Lanza (the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting occurred on December 14, 2012), Mark Chapman (murdered John Lennon in New York City on December 8, 1980), Eric Harris (the Columbine High School massacre that occurred on April 20, 1999 at Columbine High School in Columbine), Sirhan Sirhan (the 1968 assassination of U.S. Senator Robert F Kennedy), Ted Kaczynski (Unabomber), or Seung-Hui Cho (the Virginia Tech massacre occurred on April 16, 2007 on the campus of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia) may suggest significance of this point. Fox News reported on July 12, 2017 that a Michigan mother disappeared without a trace and her husband had a heartfelt message for his wife: "I just wish I would have listened to her more about how she was treated at work....." (Fox News, U.S., published July 12, 2017). We may not know exactly what happened at work; but whatever happened to her at work; it must be some traumatic experiences, which led her to disappear. There may be many cases like this we experienced or witnessed in our daily social events. The subjective social trauma is in the eyes of beholder-trauma to one but not the other, which may depend on the vulnerabilities or risk factors the individuals have.

Individuals who experience subjective social trauma may not have full symptoms of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). However, the subjective social trauma may be associated with rumination when negative daily social encounters occur repeatedly, continuously, or accumulatively, which may reduce individuals' coping ability. Rumination is one of the main predictors of depressive disorders, including new onsets of depressive episodes, and anxiety symptoms [7]. Rumination refers to the tendency to repetitively think about the causes, situational factors, and consequences of one's negative emotional experience [8]. In a sense, rumination in subjective social trauma may be similar to re-experience or intrusion symptoms of PTSD. My research on PTSD symptom profile indicated that only symptom of re-experience or intrusion was statistically significantly associated with anxiety [9]. This finding was consistent with our data on subjective social trauma, which indicated that subjective social trauma was statistically significant association with sense of control, happiness, and mood and anxiety symptoms. In addition, subjective social trauma was also shown to be statistically significantly correlated with PTSD severity when traditional trauma as that defined in DSM-5 was controlled for.

The take-home point is this: psychological distress may have its root in our daily social interaction. If our lives were free of conflicts, then we would have been all happy. Individuals have their own view of the world they live in. The stresses caused by our daily social encounters could be perceived as traumatic experiences by individuals. My view of this type of subjective social trauma does not render the traditional construct of PTSD meaningless. If it does, it may suggest the construct of PTSD might not be so robust. Instead, I suggest that a different type of trauma may also exist and we should explicitly acknowledge its impact on our well-being rather than consider it merely as “normal” daily stresses. Until we fully understand the individuals’ trauma perspective, can we provide more effective intervention to improve the lives of those who suffer?

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