

## WHITE PAPER

# Post Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Healthcare Disparity

Diabetes, cancer and obesity are commonly discussed maladies that plague minority communities. However, mental illness in general and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), in particular, are gaining traction in garnering media attention, especially as they relate to higher incidences among members of the military.

There is a steady stream of information and statistics that demand our attention as family members, healthcare providers, co-workers, friends and even neighbors. It is vitally important to understand the dynamics of mental illness, recognize the signs and symptoms as potential precursors and be able to advise or guide the sufferer in the most compassionate ways possible. The statistics are staggering, the myths are abundant and, for many, the notion of seeking help is intimidating.

Whether members of the military or civilian sector, the fact remains that mental illness, in the form of PTSD, impacts an overwhelming segment of the general population but more aggressively effecting members of minority communities. Simply living in highly stressed, at times, violent and poverty stricken urban areas can often boost one's predisposition to PTSD. With less access and availability to mental health services, prevention and treatment can be stifled.

Current research indicates that one in three veterans is diagnosed with PTSD. An estimated 7.8 percent of all Americans will experience some form of PTSD during the course of their lifetime according to the same research. The 2009 study indicated that African Americans were 20 percent more likely to admit to experiencing mental distress than non-Hispanic Whites. Surprisingly, non-Hispanic Whites are twice as likely to be prescribed and use antidepressant drugs as non-Hispanic African Americans. Women, particularly vulnerable, are twice as likely as men to suffer from the disorder. Of adults between the ages of 18-54, 3.6 percent or 5.2 million people have



experienced PTSD in some form during the course of a given year. Yet research suggests that less than one half of people with serious mental illness ever receive treatment.

Myths abound surrounding PTSD and mental illness in general. Mental health sufferers are violent and unpredictable is a widely held myth. The reality, however, is that they are no more violent than anyone else. In fact, less than five percent of violent crimes or acts are committed by people with mental illness but they are over ten times more likely than the general population to be victimized. The notion that anyone will go unimpacted by mental illness is yet another myth. A study conducted in 2011 revealed that one in five American adults has dealt with or is dealing with mental health issues on some level. Major depression has been a complaint of one in ten young Americans. Further, one in twenty individuals have, at some point lived with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in men can stem from childhood neglect, physical abuse, combat exposure, or any number of other significant traumatic

events. In women, it often stems from childhood physical abuse, physical attacks, sexual molestation, threats with weapons, or other traumatic experiences. Many of these are pre-existing conditions which compound the known stresses of serving in the military and further enhance the possibility of falling prey to the disorder. The negative implications for one's life and future health outcomes hangs in the balance as the rate of suicides increase exponentially, two of three marriages fail, homelessness rises (one-third of our nations veterans are or have been homeless), poverty ensues, and the vicious cycle continues as one man's illness becomes that of a nation.

What can be done to combat the issue? Largely, but not solely, a military dilemma, it will take a strategic, interdisciplinary, and collaborative approach to at least continue to scratch the surface before achieving major strides. While the Veterans Administration offers healthcare and vocational rehabilitation, only 28.4 percent and 14.8 percent of veterans have utilized these services, respectively. Vets report lack of awareness of benefits and knowledge of how to apply as reasons for not utilizing these services.

African Americans, in particular, often avoid seeking help because of negative societal views of mental health issues and practitioners. The destigmatization of mental healthcare outreach could go far in making it a more acceptable practice for individuals to initiate the process and utilization of mental health services. Insurers should legislate for better coverage to enable patients to feel less of a financial burden once they do seek help. Moreover, studies indicate that patients are more comfortable being treated by clinicians who look like them. Creating increased opportunities for patients to be treated by practitioners that they more closely identify, seemingly allows for improved openness

**An estimated 7.8 % of all African Americans will experience PTSD in the course of their lifetime.**

and sharing. Early support for children diagnosed with mental health disorders can serve to eliminate or control for future problems. Access to health professionals trained in sensitivity to ethnically related stressors and to understand the framework in which to conceptualize differences in racial and ethnic experiences could prove key in helping providers assess patients' needs. Further, faith-based initiatives

performing community outreach services have been gaining ground in providing assistance on a grassroots level. More attention to mental health concerns could potentially make an even bigger impact on improving

mental health outcomes in local communities.

Often undiagnosed, many sufferers go untreated. It is imperative that American families and health-care providers be alert to masked cues which often signal distress and stand at the ready to provide support and guidance in seeking and obtaining help. Careful listening and observation of individual's behavior can go a long way in more efficiently and effectively detecting the signs of trouble or illness when they present themselves. Long term initiatives of government, communities and healthcare professionals alike are important in securing positive mental health outcomes for those in need. Minority mental healthcare should be seen as a nationwide health scare and all hands should be on deck in pursuing means to counter the daunting statistics that are plaguing American communities, both military and civilian alike.

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