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Can Early Intervention with Group Therapy or Individual Therapy Improve the Family Dynamic in PTSD Patients?

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Abstract

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental health disorder that affects an individual directly, while also affecting their family members around them. While PTSD is not directly correlated to the development of Secondary Stress Disorder (STS), PTSD has been shown to lead to increased rates of divorce and mood disorders in children whose parents are diagnosed with PTSD. Children who have grown up with divorced parents, or parents with PTSD, have been shown to have an increased chance of developing mood disorders and risky lifestyle behaviors. The combination of having a parent with PTSD and being divorced would likely increase the odds even further of developing a mood disorder. While there are no set guidelines for the treatment of PTSD, the use of various types of group therapies that include family members has been shown to increase relationship satisfaction. While this type of method is useful, individual therapy or even pharmacological regimens should also be included for best results. Educating family members about PTSD, and what the symptoms look like, can help reduce the increased stress associated with PTSD symptoms. If families are educated properly, divorce rates and mood disorder development among family members can be decreased.

Keywords: PTSD, STS, divorce rate, mood disorder, therapy, pharmacological regimen

Introduction

- Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) occurs directly after a traumatic event occurs.
- Clinically, it is diagnosed by numerous different symptoms but the most common symptoms are flashbacks, recurrent dreams, avoidance of external reminders, negative emotional state, detachment, irritable behavior, reckless behavior, exaggerated startle response, and sleep disturbances.
- There is an estimated 13 million people who have PTSD, but with the longest occurring war, the number is likely higher.
- Secondary Stress Disorder (STS) occurs when individuals are constantly exposed to individuals with PTSD. STS has identical symptoms to PTSD, except for the lack of traumatic exposure.
- With no current guidelines to the treatment of PTSD or STS. This paper aims to explore and summarize what the family dynamic looks like with a member of the family diagnosed with PTSD, the development of children with PTSD parents, and some of the current treatment options for a patient with PTSD.

Statement of the Problem

With one of the longest running wars in the American history occurring, there is an increase in the development and diagnoses of PTSD. The family dynamic seen with these patients is very poor and typically leads to divorce and even suicide within the family. These types of issues can put a strain on the mental development for all members of the family.

Research Question

- Can having a spouse/parent diagnosed with PTSD lead to the development of STS?
- Does PTSD cause an increase in divorce?
- Is there a cognitive change in behavior with children who have grown up with a parent diagnosed with PTSD?
- Is there a cognitive change in behavior with children who have grown up with divorced parents?
- In newly diagnosed PTSD patients, is there a preferred treatment option used to improve the family dynamic and in doing so reducing the risk of further mental illness development in other family members?

Literature Review

Development of STS with a spouse/parent diagnosed with PTSD

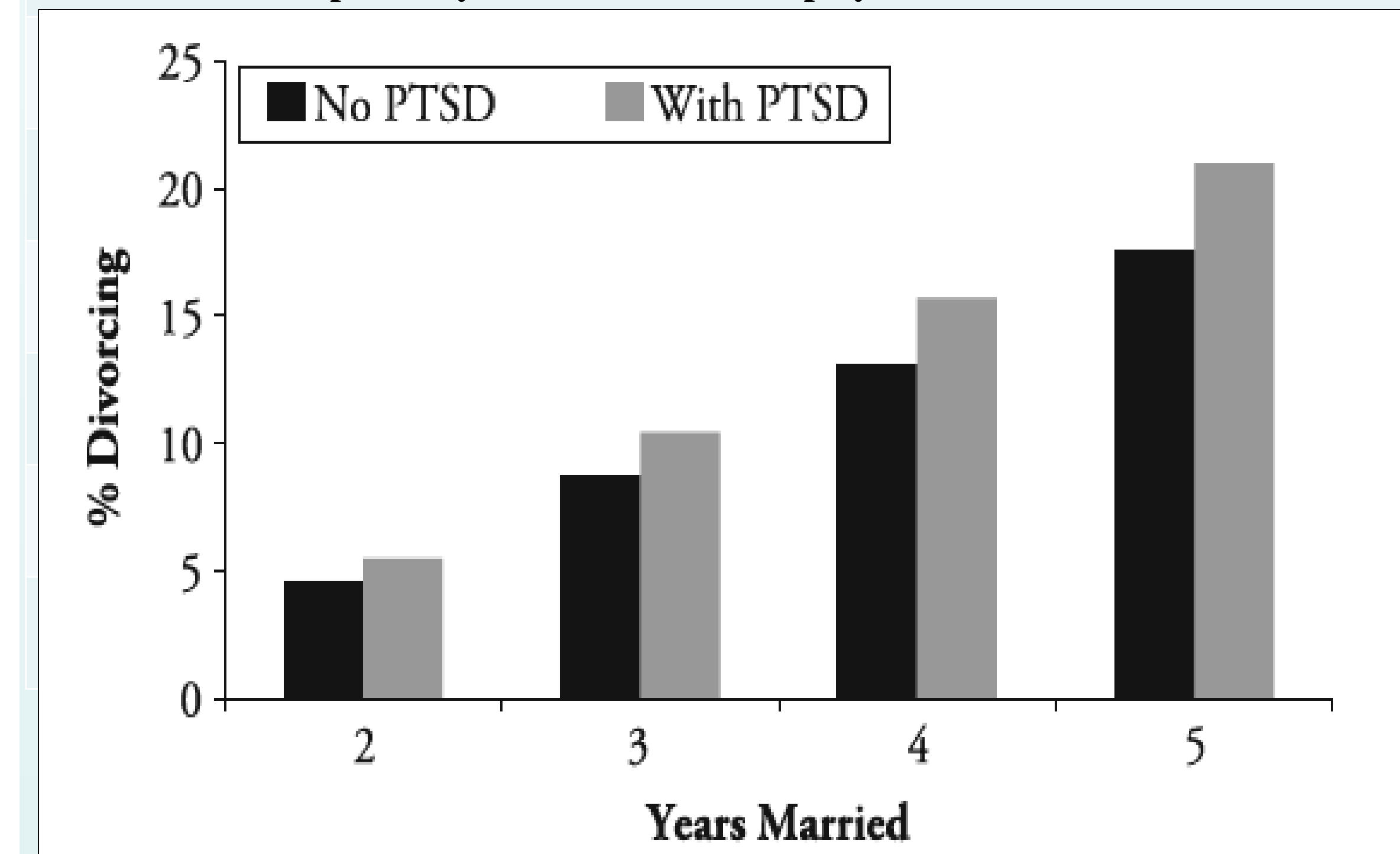
- According to the DSM-V, STS occurs when individuals are constantly exposed to individuals with PTSD.
- In a meta-analysis by Julia et al. (2016) looked at the percentage of STS development among the children and spouses of PTSD individuals. Eight of their 27 studies showed that there is STS development in the children and spouses of PTSD individuals.
- In a study done by Thomas et al. (2016), a sample size of 115 veterans and their families were interviewed to determine if there were any symptoms of STS in their children or spouses. Of the 115 families, 25 (13.5%) showed Internalizing symptoms and 22 (14.8%) showed Externalizing symptoms.

Divorce Rates among PTSD individuals

- With the very long list of symptoms that comes with PTSD, there is likely an increase in marital stress.
- Foran et al. (2013) conducted a survey among 851 active duty soldiers with and without PTSD and their families. The survey looked at the intent of divorce among the families. Of the 851 families, 37.6% were experiencing marital problems.
- Negrusa et al. (2014) used a longitudinal study that looked at the likelihood of divorce among soldiers who have deployed against those who have not deployed. The results showed that there is an increase likelihood of divorce when an individual is deployed and the odds increase the more times a soldier does deploy.

TABLE 1

Predicted divorce probably after a 12-month deployment



Behavior changes in children with PTSD parents

- Since there is no proven STS development among children with PTSD parents, a common occurrence was the development of behavioral changes.
- Creech and Misca (2017) performed a meta-analysis that looked at 20 different studies. All of the studies that met their search criteria showed that there is a relationship with PTSD and mental health development. Parent's showed a 171% increase likelihood of reporting internalizing and externalizing symptoms.
- Forrest et al. (2018) looked at the long term effects of mental health on children by using 1,418 children of Vietnam veterans. The results showed that the adult children of the veterans were more likely to develop anxiety, depression, thoughts of suicide, self-harm, or have a suicidal plan compared to non-veterans.
- Dansby and Marinelli (1999) took 23 families and looked at the children's behavior within the school system. The children of veterans were reported by their teachers to exhibit more problematic behavior, along with depression and anxiety.

Literature Review Cont'd

Behavior changes in children with PTSD Parents cont.

- To explain why this behavior occurs, Ugolini et al. (2018) breed 25 mice and immediately were placed into three groups after birth. A maternal separation group, tactile stimulation group, and a control group. All three groups were put through stress induced tested. The results showed that there was an increase in PKA activity due to the stress. This increase in PKA activity is linked to mood disorders and was shown to occur during late-adolescent.

Behavior change in children with Divorced Parents

- With the increased likelihood of divorce among individuals with PTSD and the increase likelihood of developing a mood disorder with a PTSD, there is also an increase likelihood of mood disorders among children with divorced parents alone.
- Afifi et al. (2009), took a sample of 5,159 two parent families until the age of 15. After extensive interviewing with trained interviewers, it was determined that there was an increase in development of depression, dysthymia, bipolar I, and PTSD.
- Ångarne and Wadsby (2010) took a sample of 239 participants whose parents were divorced and then looked to see if they had a psychiatric file. If a file was found, then they collected the diagnosis that were made. There was a 20.9% increase in likelihood of psychiatric contact within the divorce group. The most common diagnosis was anxiety and depression and there was an increased likelihood of "Injury, poisoning and certain other consequences of external causes"
- Theunissen et al. (2017) also investigated the link between divorce and behavioral problems by using questionnaires and well child checks. The sample consisted of 2,490 children and there is an increased likelihood of developing a behavior problem (P=0.02) with divorced compared to non-divorce.

Preferred Treatment options for the diagnosis of PTSD

- Maccani et al. (2012) did a review of literature on certain medications in their ability to prevent the development of PTSD. The use of beta-blockers, glucocorticoids, and opiates shortly after a traumatic has been shown to help prevent the development of PTSD.
- Neil et al. (2017), focused on the use of Emotionally Focused Couples Therapy (EFT) to minimize PTSD symptoms. All veterans and spouses expressed positive improvements in all aspects of their relationship
- Sautter et al. (2016), looked at the use of Structured Approach Therapy (SAT) vs PTSD Family Education therapy (PFE). The group in the SAT showed statistical significant improvement over the PFE group (p<0.001)
- van Ee (2018), conducted a Delphi study that looked at the opinion of 15 clinically experienced therapists on the use of Multi-family Therapy (MFT). They all agreed that the target of MFT is to explain why PTSD expresses the way it does and to explain the exact event that occurred.
- All studies concluded that the use of individual therapy alone is not recommended.

Discussion

- PTSD is becoming one of the largest growing mental health diagnoses in America. This is primarily due to the current longest running war in American history.
- These results directly correlate with the mental development of children with a parent diagnosed with PTSD. The research has also shown that there is an increased chance of divorce among couples where one partner has PTSD, and that divorce can also lead to altered mental health development. While treatment for PTSD is still highly controversial, there is a consensus that individual therapy alone is not recommended.

Applicability to Clinical Practice

- The goal of this study was to determine the effects of PTSD on the family dynamic and what methods can be used to improve that dynamic.
- The combination of having a PTSD divorced parent would likely increase the odds of developing a personality issue.
- With our country currently going through the longest running war in American history, veterans diagnosed with PTSD is at an all time high and is likely to continue to increase.
- There is a transitive possibility that with the increase of PTSD, there is a chance that in the future there will be more diagnoses of anxiety and depression coming from the children of PTSD patients. This will lead to a higher demand in therapist, and insurance will likely have to pay more each year for therapy and anti-anxiety/depression medications.
- There has been some promising research that shows that things like EFT and MFT can lead to a reduction in PTSD symptoms and improvement in marriage happiness. If these types of therapy were to be more readily available or considered the gold standard for treatment, there could be a reduction in future anxiety and depressive symptoms in children.

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