

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

RECOVERING HOPE



JEREMY LELEK

The GOSPEL for REAL LIFE series

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

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Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: Recovering Hope

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Brad Hambrick, Series Editor

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NOTE TO THE READER

Addressing a complex topic such as *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (PTSD) within the confines of a brief booklet is a daunting task, to say the least. The instances of trauma that spark this struggle are vast, and the horrors it exudes in the mind are beyond what many of us can imagine. The symptoms associated with this diagnosis epitomize the notion of intense, paralyzing fear while reminding us (i.e., family, friends, helpers) of our duty to offer an abundance of compassion and love to those suffering from this debilitating problem.

The booklet you are about to read points to the unquestionable fundamentals of life—fundamentals we cannot afford to ignore if we hope to navigate this issue well. It incorporates the redemptive narrative of creation, fall, and redemption as they relate to the experiences associated with PTSD. This diagnosis, as it is conceptualized by our culture, is rooted in an existential threat—the experience of being confronted with danger, a threat to one’s physical well-being, or even a close encounter with death. These are things to which the gospel courageously speaks. As such, this booklet attempts to guide readers back to the essence of their existence in an effort to help them recapture the peace and contentment inherent in functioning with God’s glory as their greatest aim.

There are numerous resources that offer a myriad of methods to address the specific symptoms associated with PTSD. These methods can assist victims to gain control over things like panic, rage, and uncontrollable flashbacks. Without question, such resources should be utilized to the glory of God. This booklet does not attempt to cover similar methods in great detail.

Instead, it provides a sound worldview to understand yourself, your suffering, and most importantly God as you wade through the numerous struggles associated with this diagnosis. The ideas offered here will serve to undergird everything you do as you seek to address the symptoms associated with PTSD. They will lead you to your place in the world and point you to a God whose commitment to your good will strike you with awe. Soak in these truths as healing water to your soul, and in faith seek to apply each principle. May his Spirit grant you everything you need for this journey!



A night that will forever be etched in the depths of my consciousness is September 10, 2001. My wife and I were ten months into raising our first child. Since we were wrestling through the scarcity of funds brought on by my menial practice as a counseling intern, that evening found me at home babysitting my son while my precious wife supplemented our income as a hardworking labor-and-delivery nurse. It was a time of challenge, but for two youngsters trying to make our way in the big city of Fort Worth, it was an exciting season in our lives.

I remember the evening well. I was watching the opening game of *Monday Night Football*, and the Giants were facing off with the Broncos. The cool breeze of fall crept through the raised windows in our tiny living room, and I held our baby boy while he gulped down his final bottle before bedtime. Peace was in the air. Staring into my son's innocent-looking eyes, I had one of those moments when I was keenly aware of God's infinite love in our lives. I remember thinking, *This is going to be an amazing year. Thank you, Father, for all you have given us.* I don't remember if I finished the football game, but I am certain I went to bed that night with a hopeful heart.

The next morning began with my common routine of coffee and prayer. Shortly thereafter, I turned on the television to catch the news before heading off to a full day of counseling. On the screen I saw a place where my wife and I had been the day after our wedding, just three years before. Something was different though. The tall pristine buildings we had visited were engulfed in smoke, and at that moment I witnessed the chaos of 9/11 unfold before my eyes. The hope and calm of the night before was engulfed by horror and sadness. The joy of just a few hours earlier, brought on by thoughts of raising my son, were replaced with literal terror as I thought of him having to grow up in such a wretched world. As with all Americans that day, my life changed.

I saw my first client that morning, my mind barely able to focus. He was struggling with issues related to schizophrenia and was far more concerned about the government microphones that were recording our sessions than anything happening in New York or Washington, DC. As I listened to him elaborate on his latest conspiracy theory, pregnant with paranoia, I journeyed into my own existential nightmare. What was my life going to be like in this new age of terror? Was my family going to experience the agony of a biological or chemical attack? Would we ever step foot on an airplane again to go visit my in-laws in New York? Was the economy going to crash? Was God going to let America be decimated by evil? I admit I was in a complete state of self-protection with my kingdom at the forefront.

WHAT IS POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER?

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is described by psychiatry as

the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to an extreme traumatic stressor involving direct personal

experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or other threat to one's physical integrity; or witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person.¹

A few examples cited in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* include serving in military combat, being a victim of violent personal assault, being kidnapped, being taken hostage, seeing or experiencing a terrorist attack, being tortured, being incarcerated as a prisoner of war or in a concentration camp, or being involved in an automobile accident.² As one reads the list of potential contexts in which a person can develop symptoms cited within this diagnosis, it becomes apparent that PTSD is not reserved exclusively to the combat soldier; instead, it has the potential to touch anyone who has experienced a strong sense of threat to his or her physical well-being. As a biblical counselor, it is important to seriously consider the question, Does the Bible bear any weight in helping someone who has such a complex diagnosis as PTSD?

As we begin answering this question, it is important to remember that the label PTSD simply explains a person's behavior and thought processes while taking into account the context in which such patterns developed. In essence it describes a profoundly intense response to a profoundly intense, danger-provoking experience. These responses are centered in fear, terrifying vulnerability, and an exacerbated awareness of not being in control. They are often involuntary and may include things like "recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions," "recurrent distressing dreams of the event," "acting or feeling as if the traumatic event were recurring," "efforts to avoid thoughts, feelings, or

1. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th ed. (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000), 463.

2. *Ibid.*

conversations associated with the trauma,” or “difficulty falling or staying asleep.”³ While some of these responses feel completely involuntary, it is important for the individual to embrace the reality that they are responses nonetheless, implying the hope that a different response is possible. As such, by God’s power and grace a person can respond increasingly in wholeness, love, and integrity. However, for the person experiencing the impulsive reactions associated with the label PTSD, these responses seem almost impossible. Let’s consider one reason for this.

FIGHT OR FLIGHT: OUR AUTO-RESPONSE

As human beings we have been gifted with sensory perceptions designed to assist us in times of danger. When we are faced with a potentially harmful situation, these systems create a response commonly referred to as “fight or flight.” This response is highly physiological and correlates with a part of the brain called the hypothalamus. So if a person is threatened, the brain releases large amounts of chemicals such as adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol, causing the heart rate to significantly increase and the respiratory system to kick into overdrive, creating enormous amounts of energy in preparation for the individual to either fight off the threat or run from it. I remember once seeing a video of a helicopter crash in which the pilot was trapped in the wreckage mostly submerged under water. He was literally seconds from death. People were scrambling everywhere when suddenly a large man ran to the helicopter, knelt down, grabbed the bottom of what was left of the huge aircraft, and lifted it just enough for the pilot to break free. He did this all by himself! This seemingly supernatural surge of strength was due, in large part, to the chemical reactions associated with the “fight or flight” response.

3. *Ibid.*, 468.

“Jeremy Lelek in his remarkable booklet explores Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder inside and out, helping us deal with the unknowns and instructing us how to extend the healing and soothing love of Christ. Our ministry, Joni and Friends, works with many who are struggling with PTSD—we are so grateful to have an excellent resource like this and will recommend it to all!”

–JONI EARECKSON TADA, Joni And Friends International Disability Center

WISE RESPONSES TO THE WORLD’S THREATS

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, a profoundly intense response to profoundly dangerous experiences, manifests itself in fear, terrifying vulnerability, and lack of a sense of control. While these responses are often involuntary, Jeremy Lelek reminds us that they are still responses . . . and, thus, different responses are possible.

Here he relates the narrative of creation, fall, and redemption to the experiences of PTSD, reminding us that the gospel speaks to our experiences with danger as part of its redemptive message. He points to the wisdom of God in our suffering and reminds us of the saving grace offered by Jesus, guiding readers to the peace and contentment found in seeking God’s glory.

THE GOSPEL FOR REAL LIFE booklet series by the Association of Biblical Counselors (ABC) applies the timeless hope of Christ to the unique struggles of modern believers.

“The gospel isn’t just an ethereal idea. It’s not a philosophy, and it’s not static. It moves and shapes and transforms. I am grateful for ABC’s work of letting the gospel bear its weight on these real life sorrows and pains.”

–MATT CHANDLER, Lead Pastor, The Village Church, Flower Mound, Texas

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