

Missionary Trauma pt. 1

Recognizing and Responding to the Reality of Missionary Trauma

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Introduction:

There is a chasm of misunderstanding between the real-life experience of missionaries and many pastors. One of the contributors to the chasm is a lack of understanding.

You have no doubt heard of PTSD—post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. We choose to call it Post-Traumatic Stress. We are not clinicians, and we don't pretend to be. We are not qualified to diagnose a person as having PTSD or not. We do not want to label people.

“We can choose to label individuals who struggle to deal with the harsh realities of life as abnormal, or we recognize our common human tendencies and choose to genuinely love them and help them to find grace and peace despite their tragedies. But approaching people as abnormal/ill when they are hurting and traumatized has historically failed to help either the one suffering or the society in which they live.”

- Dr. Daniel Berger

What is PTS?

First, something abnormal happens.

It may be a crisis that happens to a person or involves **them**. **Ex.** A car accident

It may be a crisis in the life of someone very **close** to someone.

It may be the **repeated** or continual **exposure** to something hurtful, harmful, demeaning, unethical, etc. **ex.** A hurtful relationships

It may be the repeated or continual exposure to something that might be ignored in a different situation, **Ex.** Chinese Water Torture

Something abnormal happens. Is the person abnormal? NO! What happened was abnormal. For some who are dealing with PTS, the most helpful thing is to know that they are normal.

??What makes something traumatic??

1. It is “sudden,” severe, unexpected, or cumulative.
2. Normal coping mechanisms are insufficient to handle the event/accumulation. You could say it was more than we could handle at that moment.

??Can that happen to anyone??

Second, there is a response to being traumatized.

Some common responses to trauma are fear, anger, irritability, detachment, loss of appetite, headaches, hyper-arousal, sadness, worry, depression, social withdrawal, nightmares, flashbacks, etc.

PTS begins with a normal reaction to an abnormal event.

“An impairing event and a person’s normal reaction to it.”

-Dr. Daniel Berger

A few basics about trauma:

1. Trauma comes in many forms.
2. That which traumatizes one person does not traumatize another.
3. The reaction(s) may come long after the trauma.
4. The event may not have been considered traumatic at the time.
5. Every person dealing with PTS does not experience the same responses or the same number of responses.

“Trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think.”

- Bessel A. van der Kolk, The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma

Third, for some, their response(s) to trauma become a regular part of their life.

For some people, the responses to trauma are momentary. For some, the responses reoccur but lessen and eventually disappear. For others, they continue to reexperience and relive the crisis/event and their response(s) to the crisis/event. They become a

problem when they continue to reoccur and prevent a person from returning to their pre-crisis functionality.

The ongoing responses are involuntary, unpredictable, and uncontrollable. They are often brought on by “triggers” and can be debilitating.

PTS in the Life of a Missionaries:

Crisis Events in the Life of a Missionary:

Deputation, Departure, Arrival on the Field, Birth of a Child, Death in Passport Country, Earthquake/Hurricane, Betrayal, Assault, Mental Breakdown, Murder, Furlough, Coworker Departure, Burglary, Robbery, Political Upheaval

Repeated Exposures:

Expectations, Power Outages, Deception and Lying, Financial Shortfall, Sickness, Deaths, Furlough, Loneliness, Supply Shortages, etc.

1. The trauma that a missionary deals with may have taken place before they were saved and triggered through activities/events related to missionary work.
2. They may not connect the difficulty that they are facing (PTS) with a traumatic event.
3. Missionaries face unique things that are traumatic. For some, their Day-to-day life can be filled with traumatic events.

Conclusion:

PTS is not the cause of all or even most missionary problems. However, it is a real problem...and...an example of the need for understanding and resources that address their unique challenges.

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