



What factors are associated with the maintenance of PTSD after a motor vehicle accident? The role of sex differences in a help-seeking population

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Abstract

To investigate potential sex differences in factors that are associated with chronic PTSD, data from 223 participants were examined using logistic regression analyses. Each participant had been involved in a serious motor vehicle accident (MVA), which had occurred at least 6 months earlier (range 6 mos–37 years). Although men and women did not differ in the rate of diagnosed PTSD, four variables were found to interact significantly with sex in the prediction of chronic PTSD: peritraumatic experiences of helplessness, danger, and the certainty that one would die during the MVA and lack of employment. Follow up analyses indicated that although the peritraumatic experience variables were statistically significant, no notable differences emerged in the odds ratios of men and of women. In contrast, men who were unemployed were 9.94 times more likely to be diagnosed with PTSD, relative to men who were employed, while unemployed women were 2.85 times more likely to be diagnosed with PTSD, relative to women who were employed. Results are discussed in light of the role of functional limitations and their impact on the maintenance of PTSD in men and women.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, attention has been drawn to the fact that women are at greater risk than men for the development of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following a traumatic event (e.g., Breslau & Davis, 1992; Brewin, Andrews, & Valentine, 2000; Kessler, Sonnega, Bromet, Hughes, & Nelson, 1995). Additionally, several studies have indicated that females are four times more likely than males to maintain PTSD symptoms once the disorder has developed (Breslau & Davis, 1992; Breslau, Davis, Andreski, & Peterson, 1991). Unfortunately, these conclusions are limited by comparison of male and female samples that have experienced different types of traumas (e.g., combat, sexual assault). Moreover, this type of comparison downplays relevant dimensions of the trauma, such as the nature of the event (e.g., on-going versus one-time trauma, Saxe & Wolfe, 1999). The present report will address these limitations by exploring the role of sex differences in the *maintenance* of PTSD among men and women who have experienced the same trauma, namely a serious motor vehicle accident (MVA). In this report, efforts will be made to identify factors that are differentially associated with chronicity of the disorder in men and women.

In reviewing the available literature, three salient questions emerge. First, are women more likely to develop PTSD? Several studies have examined this question with particular reference to the development of PTSD following a serious MVA. Blanchard and colleagues (1996) noted that gender failed to predict PTSD status and symptom severity in MVA survivors assessed one to four months after their accident. A more recent study prospectively followed 122 MVA survivors in the 1-month following their accident and examined various risk factors for their differential value in predicting PTSD in men versus women (Fullerton et al., 2001). Although the risk of developing PTSD at 1 month was 4.4 times greater for women, logistic regression analyses indicated that these sex differences were not associated with prior trauma, prior PTSD, major depression, other anxiety disorders, or passenger injury. Peritraumatic dissociation was the only factor which revealed sex differences, with women who reported dissociation being 7.6 times more likely than men who reported dissociation to develop PTSD. Taken together, these studies do not consistently identify factors that differentially place women at greater risk for the development of PTSD after a MVA.

A second salient question in this literature asks if women are more likely to experience chronic symptoms of PTSD, once the disorder has developed. To date, only a handful of studies have examined this issue among MVA survivors, with several studies suggesting that the greater risk conferred to women in the development of PTSD may not continue forward in time. In other words, although women appear to be at greater risk to develop PTSD, sex differences may not continue to exert an influence in the maintenance of the disorder. For example, Ursano et al. (1999) reported follow-up data from the same sample utilized by Fullerton et al. (2001). At 12 months post-trauma, females in this sample were 4.6 times more likely to be diagnosed with PTSD, relative to males. However, after adjusting for pre-existing PTSD diagnosis, income, lifetime anxiety disorder diagnoses, and Axis II diagnoses, women did not have a higher risk for chronic PTSD than men. Jeavons (2000) reported a lack of sex differences among 58 MVA survivors assessed 1 year after their accident in order to identify post-trauma problems. Freedman, Brandes, Peri and Shalev (1999) reported a similar lack of sex differences in a 4-month follow-up of 236 trauma survivors recruited from a general hospital's emergency room, many of whom were

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