

Fireworks and Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome

Posted by [David Neubauer, M.D.](#) on Fri, Jun 29, 2007, 2:10 pm PDT

I'm vacationing in Florida with my family and will be in Lauderdale-by-the-Sea for the Fourth of July. We'll go to the beach to have a great view of the fireworks displays up and down the coast, and we'll be close enough to feel the shock waves of the loud explosions nearby. It should be a great holiday celebration and a very nice family outing.

But if the dramatic sights and sounds of fireworks will be exciting for me and my family, they may be utterly horrifying for people with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), who can have extreme panic reactions in response to explosions.

Especially vulnerable will be PTSD sufferers recently returned from Iraq. Many have survived the explosions of mortars or roadside bombs and other improvised explosive devices (IEDs).

Many have been injured by these devices and have witnessed the sudden deaths of friends and colleagues. Throughout their tours of duty, they have had to be constantly vigilant about IEDs everywhere in the Iraqi countryside.

Although PTSD is a relatively recent official diagnosis, the persistent psychological effects of traumatic events have been recognized for hundreds of years. My own great uncle Herbert was treated for "shell shock" following his service in France during World War I.

PTSD is viewed as a type of anxiety disorder. It affects a certain percentage of people who have been exposed to a stressful event that they've experienced as highly traumatic. They respond with fear, helplessness, or horror. It can be an actual catastrophic event or a severe threat.

People with PTSD may have intrusive flashbacks of the traumatic experience, avoid situations that may trigger memories of the original event, have difficulty sleeping and experience intense nightmares, and feel jumpy or jittery.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs provides extensive information on the Web site of the [National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder](#). This site contains lots of advice for veterans returning from Iraq and for their families, as well as links to many other resources.

We're looking forward to the Fourth of July celebrations, but I'll be thinking of the PTSD sufferers who are staying as far away from fireworks as they possibly can.

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