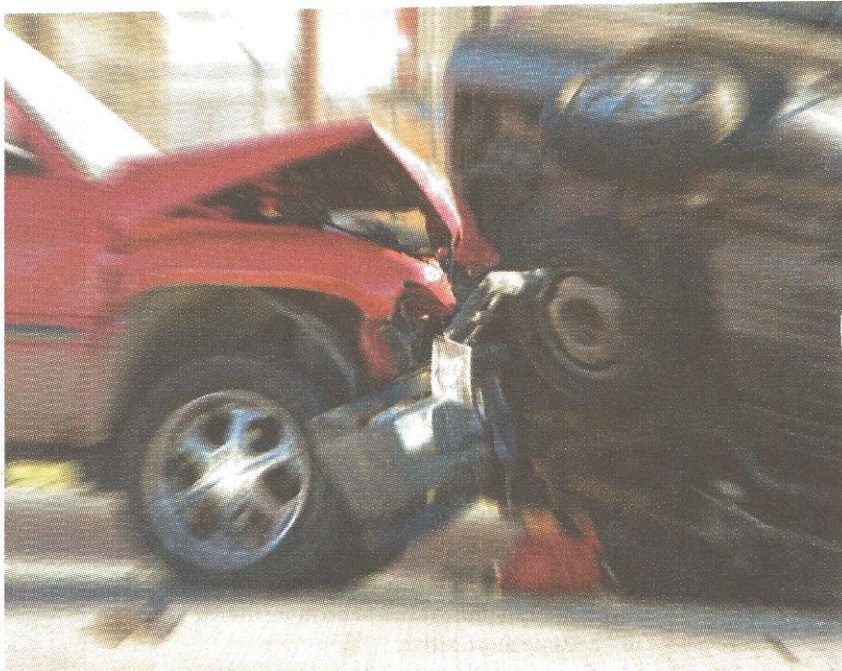


Car accidents: the American PTSD epidemic for all ages

By Phyllis Kasper, PhD



Strangely, if you Google “car + accident + PTSD,” you won’t find much of value to you as an individual who has been in an accident. There isn’t much available for physicians or chiropractors or psychologists either, except for incomprehensible research on screening questionnaires. Looking for motor vehicle accident (MVA) doesn’t tell you much either. Yet MVAs are the most common cause of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in the United States for men and the second most common for women. Children and adolescents seem to be left out of the research — and perhaps out of awareness — because their symptoms may be different from those of adults.


The way that text books, diagnostic manuals and insurance companies define PTSD is very strict and narrow. It gives the impression that we ordinary mortals don’t need or deserve proper evaluation and therapy. This means that most medical professionals won’t think to check for PTSD symptoms unless there has been serious physical injury with danger of death or disability. To me it makes the most sense to focus on what has changed for individuals after an accident, regardless of whether any bodily harm was done or there was danger of death. Often that person who was at home and got a phone call from the police is just as traumatized as those in the car.

The site www.ptsdsupport.net has the best PTSD fact sheet with a checklist of symptoms. I like their pointing out that PTSD is not about being crazy or mentally ill. Symptoms they list include: re-experiencing or reliving the event; having triggers to panic/fear with physical sensations; avoidance of activities or places; having less faith in a positive future; avoiding people; irritability; loss of interest in rewarding activities; inability to concentrate, relax and fall asleep easily; having nightmares; and more. There are often new physical symptoms or an increase in intensity of existing symptoms such as irritable bowel, headaches or chronic fatigue. Children can have the same symptoms as adults, but also are likely to go backwards in their toilet training, have tantrums or become more clingy and dependent. Older children and teens might not want to leave the house or ride in a car, might stop doing homework, show less motivation in general or self-medicate with alcohol.

PTSD isn’t a mental illness; it’s the way normal people react to a

situation that disrupts their sense of safety in the world. The information is stored mainly in the survival gear of the brain, where it can’t be edited or updated by the intellect. We can’t control reactions like nightmares, being alert and on guard, flinching or sweating simply by willpower. PTSD can be disabling for people who need to commute to work or who drive for a living.

It’s important to get an accurate evaluation and treatment plan early on so that it will be covered by accident insurance. If the MVA occurred on the job, psychotherapy should be covered by workers’ compensation, with the goal of getting back to work. Even if the symptoms of PTSD aren’t disabling, why suffer if treatment with eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) and other methods can help and heal? This is especially true if symptoms cause problems for the other people in your life. If you can’t sleep, chances are your spouse will have difficulty sleeping. Family might be sympathetic and supportive, or they might be judgmental and hostile. They might encourage therapy or fight against it. They are especially likely to be hostile if you can’t go back to work or fulfill family roles due to the PTSD. If a child doesn’t want to go to school, can’t sleep, won’t get into the car or doesn’t do homework, it disrupts family life. The usual methods of discipline will backfire because they only increase the level of anxiety.

That sense of safety in the world is an iffy thing because anything can happen at any time. Even if you never leave the house, a car or truck could actually smash into your house and kill you in your sleep. Certainly the daily news includes accidents. When you are on the road, other drivers speed, run stop lights, weave while on the cell phone or cut you off suddenly. So it’s easy for the flames of fear to reignite. Therapy can definitely provide tools for coping and re-establishing confidence. If you aren’t distracted by fear or anger, you will be a better and safer driver. 

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