In the Aftermath of Trauma: The Psychological Impact

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Objectives

At the conclusion of this presentation, the participants will be able to:

• Enhance plans, help the organization focus & refine preparations to assist the affected
• Relative to the hostage scenario, describe signs and symptoms of PTSD
• Describe the impacts to recovery for the individual
• Explain strategies for limiting the immediate impact and effects of the acute stress event
• Discuss lessons in acceptance and moving forward after the acute stress event

My Story

• Born and raised in California to a loving family
• Attended Brigham Young University and studied nursing
• Married, moved to Utah, blessed with five children (four of the five are now in health care)
• Worked most of my career in perinatal nursing
• It was never a part of my plan to become an “authority” on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
• “Life is what happens while you’re busy making other plans” John Lennon
My Story (cont.)

• In the Spring of 1989, a 39-year-old mother demanded a tubal ligation, following the delivery of her 10th child, despite objections from her husband
• The procedure was performed
• Shortly thereafter, my husband and I moved to Hawaii, returning to the mainland in 1991

The Alta View Hospital Women’s Center

• Located on the East Bench in Sandy, Utah about 15 miles South of downtown Salt Lake City
• The Women’s Center is attached to the north side of the main hospital via an enclosed walkway on the 2nd floor
Leaping forward 2½ years…
Desecrating the Sanctuary

Friday, September 20, 1991

- I was the Charge Nurse in the Alta View Hospital Women’s Center in Sandy, UT
- At approximately 2345 I was making rounds in the Nursery when I heard a commotion at the labor and delivery nursing station
- I looked out the nursery door and saw a man holding a shotgun with a large caliber handgun tucked into the back waistband of his Levi’s
- Thus began an 18-hour ordeal that changed my life — and the lives of many others — forever!

View of the Command Post
The Loss of Control

• Immediately recalled my encounter with the intruder two years earlier
• I motioned for the doctor to duck
• I was behind the armed intruder — he was facing and yelling at Karla, the new nurse, so he did not see me until I spoke

Incident Timeline
Destroying the “Safe Haven”

2345 – 0015
• Intruder demanded Karla and I go into the nursery and wheel two newborns in their cribs out into the hall
• Karla and I were forced outside at gunpoint
• Karla saw police officers in the parking lot and attempted to wrestle the shotgun from the man’s hand
• He raised the handgun and shot her in the back as she turned to run
• She fell immediately and died on the spot
• He grabbed my arm and forced me back into the hospital
• As we moved up the stairs, the gun was pressed into the back of my head
Incident Timeline (cont.)
The Violation and Loss of Trust

0015 – 0100
- We went into the laboring patient’s room along with the two newborns and were told to lie on the floor
- Margie, the nurse I had assigned to care for the laboring patient, was forced to place a call to the intruder’s wife
- He shot the phone after the call
- The patient’s boyfriend was sent outside to retrieve a tackle box, hidden in the bushes at the front of the Women’s Center, and bring it back into the building
- During this time, the doctor and the nursery nurse were evacuating the newborns remaining in the nursery

Incident Timeline (cont.)
The Expectation to “Deal With It”

0100 – 0300
- Moved from 2nd floor L&D to 3rd floor physician’s office
- Physician’s office ransacked, shots fired
- Around 0200, hostages were permitted to make phone calls
- I continued to dose patient’s epidural
- Provided ongoing care for infants and laboring patient
- Epidural medication ran out around 0230
- Decided to move forward with delivery
  0323 Delivered infant
  0340 Delivered placenta
### Incident Timeline (cont.)

#### “Are We Truly Prepared?”

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<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Events</th>
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| 0400 – 1700 | • Ongoing threats  
|          | • Continuing negotiation efforts  
|          | • Absolute control over hostages  
|          | • Ongoing care of patient and newborns  
|          | • Wrote a letter to my family  
|          | • Had a group prayer |

### Incident Timeline (cont.)

#### The Stranger Beside Me

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| 1700 – 1830 | • Intruder became fatigued  
|          | • Realized futility of the situation  
|          | • I asked the intruder, “Do you trust me?” He said he did, and I replied, “then give me the gun.” He did  
|          | • Margie was on the phone with negotiator and told him, “Susan’s got the gun, we’re out of here”  
|          | • She then ran past me, grabbed the gun and we exited the building |
Free at Last

Our Daughter and Granddaughter
The Immediate Aftermath

• Driven by police to the Command Post
• Handed infant over to RN colleague in ambulance
• Greeted by two close friends, an FBI agent and a Sandy City Fireman and reunited with my husband and family

The Immediate Aftermath (cont.)

• Transported via ambulance to sister hospital ED for medical evaluation and interviews
• Interviewed by a detective
• Released after about 3 hours (and 2 Tylenol for my headache)
• Had two “panic attacks” first one on drive home second when I walked into our home because the blinds were open
Sunday, September 22, 1991
“Am I Going Crazy?”

• Unable to sleep
• Spent time with family, declined to go to Church
• Began hearing rumors that were not factual
• Started questioning myself and my memory
• Had numerous flashbacks and intrusive thoughts
• Felt guilty about Karla’s death

Monday, September 23, 1991
Repeating the Insult

• Open meeting with Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Team (30–40 attendees)
• Went on a “walk through” of the facility and discussed damages with the targeted doctor and one of his partners
• Demonstrated positioning in the parking lot for detectives
Tuesday, September 24, 1991

• Met with the District Attorney and ATF agents at the hospital to answer questions and provide details of the event

And Life Moved On…

How my life changed
• Avoided leaving the house
• Reacted to loud noises
• Continued “flashbacks” and “panic attacks”
• Difficulty sleeping
And On

• Unable to think coherently
• Thought I was going “crazy”
• Unable to control my reactions or emotions
• Felt isolated, no friends called
• Began reading true crime books

The Legal Process
The Unintended Impacts

• Had multiple interviews with ATF, FBI, other law enforcement officers and the prosecuting attorney
• Met twice with Victim Witness Counselor in preparation for court appearance
• Testified at preliminary hearing
• Offender accepted a plea bargain to avoid the death penalty
• Called back to Salt Lake for sentencing
Physical Changes

- Headaches
- GI symptoms
- Severe pain in hands, joint deterioration
- Fatigue
- Weight gain

Supportive Interventions
How the System is “Prepared”

- Attended several “counseling sessions”
- Able to host Dr. Frank Ochberg in our home on two separate occasions
- Sought medical care from a trusted physician
- Eventually began psychotherapy with a trusted clinician
- Experienced re-victimization as a result of multiple events and situations
My Critical Decision

• About a year after the event, my life was falling apart
• *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* by Joanne Greenberg: a semi-autobiographical story about a teenage girl’s struggle with schizophrenia and her recovery
• It was difficult, but she succeeded and I knew I had to as well
• I was not willing to let this event destroy my life

Acute Stress Disorder vs. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

• A person experiences an event outside the range of usual human experience that would be markedly distressing to almost anyone and develops significant psychological and/or physical symptoms
• Some people have very serious symptoms immediately after the event that go away after a few weeks: Acute Stress Disorder
• When symptoms persist beyond 30 days, it is usually diagnosed as PTSD
Continuum of Causative Factors

- Natural disasters
- Error-related catastrophes, e.g., shuttle Challenger
- Crime where people deliberately hurt others

Symptoms of PTSD

- Recurrent and intrusive recollections of the event
- Recurrent dreams or flashbacks
- Intense reactions to events that resemble or represent aspects of the event
- Avoidance of thoughts, feelings, situations that arouse recollections
Symptoms of PTSD (cont.)

- Feeling of estrangement from others
- Diminished interest in significant activities
- Sense of foreboding, foreshortened future

An Interesting Paradox

Persistent intrusive thoughts while trying to forget the trauma

The Paradoxical Triad of PTSD

Emotional numbing and social withdrawal
Hypersensitivity to certain stimuli
Symptoms of PTSD (cont.)

- Difficulty concentrating or maintaining coherent thoughts
- Insomnia
- Lack of trust in one’s self and others
- Self blame and or shame/survivor guilt

Symptoms of PTSD (cont.)

- Memory loss
- Resignation with markedly diminished interest in past or future
- Downward drift in socioeconomic status
- Reduced capacity for intimacy
Some Do’s

• Understand that exposure to a traumatic event changes the person
• Provide practical help (baby steps)
• Be empathetic but supportive
• Encourage medical and/or psychological interventions as indicated
• Prepare provider lists of “specialized, qualified” EAP staffers

Some Don’ts

• Don’t set unrealistic expectations
• Don’t try to “fix them”
• Avoid patronizing comments and behaviors
• Critical Incident Stress Debriefing doing more harm than good
• Medication options vs. counseling options
Hostage Aspects

- I am different now
- Survivor guilt
- As much as we prepare, we can’t prepare for everything
- Can’t change history — accept and move on
- Take lessons and embrace them actively

What can be Done to Better Anticipate and Prepare?

- Identify qualified and/or train individuals in the community who can provide appropriate care
- Learn to apply strategies that can reduce the likelihood that an individual will develop PTSD
  - Education is key
  - Critical to inform victim of expected “normal” responses
  - Provide prompt intervention and follow-up
The Nautilus as a Metaphor

I am a Survivor

Survivor Status
I have been victimized.
I was in a fight that was not a fair fight.
I did not ask for the fight. I lost.
There is no shame in losing such fights, only in winning.
I have reached the stage of survivor and am no longer a slave of victim status.
I look back with sadness rather than hate.
I look forward with hope rather than despair.
I may never forget, but I need not constantly remember.
I was a victim.
I am a survivor.

Anonymous
Thank you

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