

3rd International Conference on

Depression, Anxiety and Stress Management

June 21-22, 2017 London, UK

Vicarious trauma, PTSD and social media: Does watching graphic videos cause trauma?

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Social media allows the general population to view videos and pictures with never before seen levels of devastation and destruction. The world has been bombarded with pictures of the aftermath. Stretchers of wounded and possibly dying victims were on display as well as grief stricken relatives searching through the deceased for their loved ones. As a result of watching these events and feeling the anguish of those who are directly experiencing them does have an impact on our daily activities whilst they are being broadcast, it is believed that a proportion of the population may suffer longer lasting effects such as negative stress reactions, anxiety and in some cases post-traumatic stress disorders-PTSD. Studies have shown that vicarious trauma does happen to health professionals and is defined as the transfer of violent, traumatic experiences from client/patients to a person of a helping profession. The trauma does not occur directly but indirectly. The results of my research indicates that approximately 20% of the research participants across four clinical studies were significantly affected by media events and these individuals scored high on clinical measures of PTSD even though none of the individuals had previous trauma and were not present at the traumatic events and had only watched them on social media. My research indicates that the general populations are being affected by the viewing of violent images on social media and are being affected by vicarious trauma. Acts of violence erode our sense of security and safety, random acts of violence can create intense feelings of anger, frustration, fear and helplessness. As a result of watching these events a certain percentage of individuals are experiencing lasting effects such as negative stress reactions, anxiety and in some cases post-traumatic stress disorders or vicarious PTSD. It is important that clinicians are aware and provide additional support and guidance in the community in times of extreme violence and terroristic acts.

Biography

Pam Ramsden has completed her PhD in Counseling Psychology from an American Psychological Association approved program at the University of Kansas. She then completed an internship with the Veterans Administration in Tucson Arizona specializing in PTSD. She has worked in the area of trauma and PTSD as a Clinician and Educator for over 25 years. She is a Specialist in PTSD, trauma therapy, stress therapies and victimology.

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