

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL RESILIENCE, THE PRESENCE OF STRONG SOCIAL SUPPORTS, AND THE REACTION OF THE COMMUNITY ARE ALL FACTORS THAT WILL DETERMINE A SURVIVOR'S RECOVERY.

POST SHOOTING TRAUMA

[BY BRUCE N. EIMER, Ph.D.]

A traumatic event is a harrowing experience during which you feel like you or someone you care about may be killed or gravely injured.

Trauma can occur in the form of a single experience or it can occur cumulatively as a result of repeated or ongoing horrors. Some examples of single traumatic events are motor vehicle accidents, physical or psychological assaults, rapes, molestations, and harrowing surgical experiences. Some examples of ongoing trauma are the aftermath of natural disasters, life altering physical injuries or diseases, war, genocide, and ongoing sexual, physical and emotional abuse. Trauma can

also result from the loss of loved ones.

As defined on www.MayoClinic.com, "Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a type of anxiety disorder that's triggered by a traumatic event. You can develop post-traumatic stress disorder when you experience or witness an event that causes intense fear, helplessness or horror." The major symptoms of PTSD include intrusive and upsetting memories, dreams and flashbacks, intense fears and phobias, feelings of numbing and detachment, feelings of guilt and

depression, shame, self-blame, anger, sleeplessness, loss of libido, inability to experience pleasure (*anhedonia*), irritability, memory loss, hyper-vigilance, and increased startle reactions.

Often, trauma survivors suffering from PTSD can be helped to recover with competent counseling and psychotherapy. Getting treatment as soon as possible after a traumatic event may prevent the onset of full blown PTSD. However, a survivor's prognosis also depends on the nature, severity, complexity and duration of the trauma, the survivor's psychological and physical resilience, the presence of strong social supports, and the reaction of the community.

POST SHOOTING TRAUMA (PST). THIS IS ONE OF THE SERIOUS "COSTS" OF HAVING TO EMPLOY DEADLY FORCE TO DEFEND YOUR LIFE.



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PRIMARY PREVENTION

As a clinical psychologist, I have treated hundreds of patients who suffered from the symptoms of PTSD after experiencing discrete or ongoing traumatic events (such as being assaulted, raped, threatened or robbed, almost getting killed in a car accident, or being repeatedly abused). It has been said that an ounce of prevention can be worth a pound of cure. Thus, my work as a psychologist with trauma victims led me to research ways to help people avoid becoming victims of violence. In psychological parlance, this is known as "primary prevention." This was one of the main motivators that influenced my entry into the personal defense field, especially my avid continuing interest in armed self defense. It's better to avoid becoming a victim in the first place than to have to try to fix the traumatic damage afterward.

I think of carrying a defensive firearm and training on a regular basis as primary prevention. As noted firearms trainer and author, Clint Smith, likes to say, "We train and prepare ourselves so that we are skilled enough to avoid having to use our training." In other words, skill breeds confidence. Those who become knowledgeable, skilled, confident, and prepared to fight back also become less attractive targets for opportunistic violent criminal predators. They are less

likely to get into situations where they need to use their fighting skills.

POST SHOOTING TRAUMA (PST)

If you are involved in a deadly force incident, which is a traumatic experience, you may experience post-traumatic stress. However, the severity of symptoms will depend on the variables I've enumerated above. If you are forced to employ a firearm to end a deadly attack on yourself or other persons under the mantle of your protection, you may experience a variant of post-traumatic stress called *Post Shooting Trauma* (PST). This is one of the serious "costs" of having to employ deadly force to defend your life.

In his book *On Killing*, retired Special Forces soldier Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman discusses the trauma the soldier who kills in battle faces when he returns to civilian life. Until the current conflicts in the Middle East, this was most apparent in military combat veterans who returned from Vietnam. These soldiers fought in a war the morality of which was heavily contested at home. When they returned home, there were no organized programs dedicated to healing their psychological wounds. Grossman emphasizes how naturally horrifying the act of killing is to non-psychopaths, and how

destructive it is to one's mental health to be forced to kill another human being. Grossman's thesis is supported by my own clinical experiences in working with military combat veterans and law enforcement officers involved in line of duty shootings.

Grossman's research underscores the fact that non-psychopathic humans harbor a natural reluctance to kill other human beings and that "the reaction of 'normal' (e.g., non-psychopathic) soldiers to having killed in close combat can be best understood as a series of 'stages' similar to the ubiquitous Kubler-Ross stages of reaction to life-threatening disease." (From the "Library Journal" review of Grossman's book.) If this post violent event trauma is typical for trained soldiers, it is not surprising that it is even more typical for normal, non-psychopathic civilians who have been forced to employ deadly force in life threatening confrontations.

Noted firearms instructor Massad Ayoob has written and teaches extensively about PST. Most of what I have to say here is based on what I have learned from Mr. Ayoob in his seminars and classes, from his books, DVDs, and from personal communications with him and others (www.massadayoobgroup.com).

THE ABYSS

A self defense shooting is a near death

experience. As Ayoob points out, “You have stood on the edge of death and looked down into the abyss.” Therefore, if you survive, it is natural to experience some degree of elation and survival euphoria. After all, you prevailed and you are alive! However, anyone other than a blooming psychopath will likely feel guilty about feeling good after killing someone! Cognitive dissonance may arise as a result of the co-existence of two incompatible feelings: *guilt* as a result of violating the social prohibition against killing another human being and *elation* that you survived the deadly assault. Unresolved cognitive dissonance leads to anxiety and depression. In this type of situation, the good guy or gal who stood on the edge of death and survived may develop PST. The eventual resolution of the survivor’s intra-psychic conflict and psychological distress will require total emotional and cognitive acceptance of the inexorable fact that the survivor had to kill in order to save an innocent life.

However, this is not the only hurdle. The situation after the deadly force incident will involve much more than the survivor’s personal feelings. The survivor’s inevitable encounters with the legal system, the community, the media, and society will introduce continued trauma.

THE “MARK OF CAIN”

The upshot is that anyone other than a blooming psychopath can suffer from Post Shooting Trauma (PST) if they are forced to shoot an attacker in defense of their life or the life of another person. PST is a post-shooting-incident survivor’s reaction to two major factors. The first is our ingrained reluctance and aversion to killing another human being. The second is society’s reaction to a person who has killed, and after the event, this becomes the problem. Society will not let you feel good after you have killed someone even if the person you killed was a felonious psychopath or a raging madman trying to murder or gravely injure you.

Despite the fact that the person you killed was your potential murderer, from society’s standpoint, you will bear the “Mark of Cain”—the reaction of so-

ciety to the knowledge that you killed. This can plunge you into a deeper abyss; the abyss of shame, fear, anxiety, guilt, detachment and disconnection, social alienation, nightmares, sleeplessness, flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, and loss of drive (appetite loss, loss of libido, sexual dysfunction, inability to experience pleasure). Very soon thereafter, you can develop emotional numbing, clinical depression, and a host of physical stress related symptoms such as headaches,

solutions for reducing uncertainty and unpredictability. All of these solutions boil down to one factor: creating order out of chaos. That is, doing things to make life more predictable and less unpredictable. Knowledge applied truly *is* power.

RECOVERING FROM POST SHOOTING TRAUMA

On a basic level, the cognitive dissonance arising as a result of the factors



THE “MARK OF CAIN” CAN PLUNGE YOU INTO AN ABYSS OF SHAME AND GUILT.

indigestion, and physical pain. This complex of symptoms constitutes the abyss of Post Shooting Trauma.

COPING WITH UNCERTAINTY

The innocent would be victim initially experienced the uncertainty of whether or not he or she would survive the deadly assault. After the initial trauma, the survivor is faced with the uncertainty of whether or not he or she will survive the legal and social aftermath. These uncertainties typically last a lot longer. Uncertainty and unpredictability create anxiety. Prolonged uncertainty and unpredictability give rise to a lot of anxiety. In our book, “Coping with Uncertainty: 10 Simple Solutions,” psychiatrist Moshe Torem M.D. and I discuss simple

discussed above may be resolved both cognitively and on a feeling level by recognizing that you “feel good” simply because you have defeated someone who tried to murder you. You have been visited by the Devil and you survived! Your recovery from PST depends upon attaining the realization on a feeling level that you are not like Cain. You did not kill out of malice. You killed to live. That is not murder.

In line with the psychological principles of PTSD, the severity of your PST and your prognosis for psychological recovery will depend on the totality of the circumstances of the deadly force incident, your psychological and physical resilience, the presence of strong social supports, and the reactions of the com-

munity. In the remainder of this article, I shall highlight the variables associated with recovering from PST. Keep in mind, the research shows that recovery from PTSD follows the “rule of thirds.” One third of those afflicted are predisposed and weak and are never the same after their traumatic incident. One third go through a coping period, but they recover although they are changed and left with some residual symptoms. And for the remaining third, it’s a character building experience.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE DEADLY FORCE INCIDENT

In the field of law enforcement, a “clean shoot” refers to a shooting that is legally justified by the facts and circumstances. Such would be the case if the post shooting investigation determines that the decedent had a deadly weapon (such as greater size, strength, buddies, fighting ability, a gun, a knife, a bat or bludgeon), intended to use it on the defender, and the defender had no other viable choice than to use deadly force to stop the decedent from continuing his murderous behavior. The surviving defender’s ability to cogently articulate,

with the help of a lawyer, why the use of deadly force was the only option can set the survivor free both legally, from the criminal justice system, and socially, from the “Mark of Cain.”

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSICAL STRENGTH AND RESILIENCE

People who are psychologically strong tend to recover more rapidly and more thoroughly from trauma. In the case of PST, among other things, this would refer to having a “defensive mindset.” If you carry a gun for self protection, you had better have this mindset. It means being mentally and emotionally prepared and ready to use deadly force to save your life or that of someone else under the mantle of your protection if an attacker leaves you with no other option. Massad Ayoob talks about the “doctrine of competing harms.” If you have only two choices of action and both are undesirable (such as either dying or killing the person trying to kill you), you must make a choice. In such a circumstance, it makes sense to choose the least undesirable option and survive. It helps to keep in mind

that when a violent criminal predator buys away somebody else’s right to live, he forfeits his own.

People who are physically in good shape tend to recover more rapidly and thoroughly from trauma. Fit bodies can absorb more physical and mental stress. Therefore, it pays to stay in shape physically, whatever that means for you. The better shape you are in, the more strength you will have to fight for your life. Additionally, the more you train to use the self defense weapons you carry, the more prepared you will be to employ them should the need arise. Training regularly in the employment of defensive skills has another desirable outcome: the repetition serves to desensitize you to the employment of your skills so that if you have to employ them for real, you will be ready.

PREDICTABILITY: KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

At this point, you should recognize that if you are a good guy or gal, you may experience some degree of PST if you are involved in a deadly force incident. The goal is to alleviate the syndrome’s severity and duration.



SUPPORT GROUPS CAN BE INSTRUMENTAL IN COPING WITH PSD.

Forewarned is forearmed and knowledge is power, therefore, it helps to know what to expect. So, knowing what to expect, what is a natural and normal reaction to the "gravest of extremes" can prepare you, if it happens, to tell your subconscious something like, "Hey Subconscious, I got the message already—knock it off." A key principle of psychological therapy is that if you understand it, you do not need to fear it as much. Ninety percent of curing a neurosis is being able to understand its psychological dynamics.

In medicine, the purpose of an inoculation is to give the patient a little bit of the disease in order to build their immunity to it. In the world of personal defense, if you know what to expect and have a plan, your odds of prevailing are heightened. In the case of PST, knowing the facts laid out in this article will help you cope and get well.

SOCIAL SUPPORT

Understanding peer groups help to mitigate the blow of PST. Typically, civilians do not have that. Cops often do. Cops with group support cope best after being involved in a line of duty shooting or being a first responder on a disaster scene. So, to the extent that you can convene support groups, you will be building your psychological strength should the unthinkable occur. Support groups help you get bonded in a social sense. Joining and becoming active in local grass roots gun clubs is one route. Another is joining national organizations dedicated to helping law abiding citizens who have been involved in deadly force incidents. Such groups can help you conclude that you did the right thing (if indeed you did!) and that you are not like the criminal who tried to murder you.

One such organization is the Armed Citizens Legal Defense Network (www.armedcitizensnetwork.org). This is a national grass roots educational organization that organizes and disseminates information on attorneys who specialize in defending people involved in self defense shootings and on legal experts in the field of armed self defense. The Network publishes a monthly online newsletter, has an ac-

tive website and organizes continuing education conferences. It educates members about the legalities of using deadly force for self defense and how to interact with the criminal justice system after a shooting.

Another source of psychological and social support may come from faith based organizations. For many people, their spiritual beliefs and religious faith helps them to handle the aftermath of trauma. Most religions distinguish between killing and murder. Most religions acknowledge that there will be a time when the good man has to kill the evil man, and that doesn't make you bad. It is important to remember that in deadly force incidents there are no second or first place winners, there are only survivors.

It also helps to have a plan in place regarding whom to contact and what their job should be if you are arrested after a self defense shooting (such as to call your attorney or to arrange bail). The better educated your family members, friends, and neighbors are regarding your personal integrity and the factors that justify the use of deadly force, the more helpful they are likely to be if the balloon goes up. It will help to have a self defense lawyer (or several such lawyers) available to call, whose acquaintance you have already made (see www.ArmedCitizensNetwork.org). Cops are instructed not to make any statements to the investigators without their FOP attorney present and it only makes sense for non-sworn citizens to follow this principle as well.

One last thing: your community's reactions to a deadly force incident will vary as a function of where you live. The local news media disseminates information in the community. It both influences and is influenced by local politics. It is wise to not make any statements to the media lest you cause distorted facts and rumors to be disseminated which could burn you in the court of public opinion. Such bad social feedback can fuel the fires of PST.

SUMMARY

Post Shooting Trauma is nearly inevitable for the good guy or gal who is forced to shoot someone in defense of

his or her life, or in defense of the life of another person under the mantle of his or her protection. Knowing that the symptoms of PST are normal and nearly inevitable does two major things for law abiding citizens. First, it makes any sane person want to avoid, if at all possible, having to use deadly force, because even if it is justified, the aftermath can be hell. Second, knowing what to expect can help to diminish a lot of the anxiety that lies at the core of the PST syndrome.

Hopefully, this article will persuade the reader to learn more about PST. To gain more in depth knowledge, I encourage you to familiarize yourself with the work of Massad Ayoob. By doing so, you will become a more responsible concealed carry practitioner and gun owner. This will convince you to avoid trouble and help you stay safe. However, in the event that you are attacked and you do what is necessary to survive the event, you will be more prepared afterward to cope with the pain and with society's reaction. ★

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Massad F. Ayoob
Post Shooting Trauma
Concord, NH: Police Bookshelf.
www.Ayoob.com

Massad F. Ayoob
Physio-Psychological Aspects of Violent Encounters
Concord, NH: Police Bookshelf.
www.Ayoob.com

Lt. Col. Dave Grossman
On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society
Back Bay Books

Bruce N. Eimer and Moshe Torem,
Coping with Uncertainty: 10 Simple Solutions
E-Book available for download:
<http://www.personaldefensesolutions.net/ccw/BK003.html>
(Originally published by New Harbinger Publications, Oakland, CA.)