

### Audio Transcript

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Guest:	Patricia Watson, PhD
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Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, where we talk to experts about post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health, and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport, clinical psychologist at the Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD.

On today's episode, we will talk about mental health after disasters and mass violence. I'm joined today by Dr. Patricia Watson, a clinical psychologist with the National Center for PTSD and consultant with the PTSD Consultation Program. She's also co-author of the Psychological First Aid and the Skills for Psychological Recovery Field Guides. Welcome to the podcast, Dr. Watson.

Dr. Patricia Watson:

Thank you very much, Colleen. It's a pleasure to be here today.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

So, I want to start by clarifying terms. What are we talking about when we use the word "disaster" in this context?

Dr. Patricia Watson:

In general, disasters are large scale events that have the potential to cause loss of life or property, and we tend to separate them into natural disasters, which are events like hurricanes, floods, wildfires, earthquakes, and droughts. And then we also talk about mass violence, which is used to describe incidents that are human-caused disasters, such as shootings and acts of terrorism that can impact whole communities and the country at large.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And what are some of the ways that people's mental health is impacted by disasters and mass violence?

Dr. Patricia Watson:

We found in the research that the most common post-disaster mental health problems have been things like depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and increases in alcohol drugs, and complicated grief. In children it might look like, unstable mood or problems falling asleep, fear and grief around anniversaries at the event. They also commonly experience multiple physical complaints like stomach aches or headaches. And what we found is that more common than the mental health problems that I just described are changes in the way that people look at the world, look at themselves in the world, including a loss of feeling of safety, loss of positive beliefs about others, a decline in their sense of social support, a decrease in their sense of control. And a lot of times they might feel more vulnerable as well.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

We're talking about a wide range of different experiences, so everything from a devastating hurricane to mass shootings. Do people tend to react differently to these types of events or do different types of events cause different types of mental health symptoms?

Dr. Patricia Watson:

That's a great question. Yes. People do tend to react differently to these types of events. And different types of events do cause different mental health symptoms. What we know from the research is that the most important risk factor is how large scale the event is, how catastrophic it is, really large-scale events tend to have stronger impact on communities and individuals. We also see that human-caused events, mass violence, that type of thing tends to more negatively affect mental health. People have more significant PTSD symptoms, they have more difficulty making sense of what's happened. The whole community can start to have a sense of fearing another shooting or feeling like we should have prevented this. Both with mass violence and with natural disasters, if they're large scale enough and chaotic enough, catastrophic enough, people tend to have more distrust of outsiders who come in. And you also can see that these types of events can cause conflict because people cope differently. They may not want to talk with others. And other people become more extroverted and want to help and want to get out there. So it can be pretty complicated.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And in recent years we've heard more about the needs of first responders, so paramedics, firefighters, what kinds of mental health needs might they have after responding to mass violence or disaster scenes?

Dr. Patricia Watson:

Thank you for asking that because this is near and dear to my heart. In general, what you see in first responders is that they end up with similar symptoms as people who are impacted directly by the disasters, including things like PTSD and depression. But what we see in them in looking at the research is that they tend to have more of the PTSD like symptoms that are more numbing. You know, they detach, they have diminished interest, and they're also more likely to report higher levels of depression, suppressed anger and substance use. But on the other hand, they also have protective factors, they have a sense of purpose. They're helping, they're doing something to support the community. And they've been well-trained, and they've been doing this for years. So many times, they have developed great positive coping skills.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I'm glad you mentioned factors that protect against developing PTSD and depression after a disaster. And now thinking forward about treatment. Are there any types of treatments or interventions for first responders?

Dr. Patricia Watson:

We at the National Center have been involved in developing self-care and coworker support model called Stress First Aid. If you can move people towards a greater sense of safety, if you can build their sense of having the skills or the resources to get through this, so this model acknowledges that people go in and out of different zones of stress and it color codes it. So, somebody can say to a coworker or a leader, look, I'm in the orange zone today. So, remember these when you or one of your coworkers is

having stress reactions, don't turn away, turn toward them. Just ask the question, how are you doing? I've noticed that you're isolating yourself and I care about you, so I want to know what's going on.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And for both first responders and survivors of disasters or mass violence, what are some of the most important things that someone can do for their mental health after going through a recent trauma?

Dr. Patricia Watson:

I think first and foremost, the most important thing is to remind yourself that stress reactions after disaster are very common. It doesn't mean you're weak or crazy, you're not alone. And they do tend to fade with time. But if they don't, it's important to seek out help from programs or counselors because it can help you keep you from feeling worse. We also know there's no right way to deal with these things. We each will find the way that works best for us. So, be patient, focus in on the routines and the things that bring meaning and a structure to your life.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And what about loved ones? What can they do to support a family member or a friend that has lived through a recent trauma?

Dr. Patricia Watson:

I think the most important thing here is to let them know that you care. You don't have to say the right thing. We know that there's probably nothing perfect that you can say to make them feel better. Most important is just to show them you care. Just be with them. Let them know they're not alone. If they want to talk, be there. But also, people sometimes do better when they're given space. So I've had people tell me they like to receive text messages from friends, but not a text message that asks a question like, "how are you doing?"; a text message that says, "I just want you to know I'm thinking about you, you don't have to respond, sending you love," or whatever that is so they don't feel pressured.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Now, what do we know about getting care after a disaster or an act of mass violence? Do you have any tips for getting the appropriate mental health care in the weeks, months, or years following a traumatic event?

Dr. Patricia Watson:

Yes. I would say early on, what we try to do is focus on giving people information and resources being really practical, establishing safety and security, getting people connected to social support. And then after a few days, weeks, and months, we've developed some interventions like Skills for Psychological Recovery that focus on building the skills that we know that are helpful, such as problem-solving skills, bringing in rewarding or meaningful activities into your schedule more consciously.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And are there specific types of treatment for survivors of disasters or mass violence?

Dr. Patricia Watson:

Yes, I would say that what we know about mental health treatment for survivors of disasters and mass violence, both the community and first responders are that cognitive behavioral interventions have the most evidence for reducing PTSD, depression, and anxiety. And these are treatment models that help people integrate what happened to them, think differently, face some of the things that they fear and learn new coping skills. My colleague Jessica Hamblen developed the Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Post-Disaster Distress, which helps people challenge unhelpful thoughts that are really common after disasters.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

You mentioned that people who've been through a disaster or episode of mass violence sometimes experience some unhelpful thoughts. Can you give us an example of what those might be?

Dr. Patricia Watson:

Sure. And I'm glad you raised this question because I want to be really clear that unhelpful thoughts is not the same as unrealistic thoughts, but it's the feeling that they cause that makes you say, that might not be helpful. So, for instance, I'm not going to be able to get through this or things will never be the same again. And it tends to make people feel sad or regretful or hopeless. So, what we try to do is modify it slightly. It might be feeling realistic to them because the world might feel like it will never be the same, but we try to modify it to make it more helpful in the sense, where they could say something like, feeling really bad usually doesn't last forever. Or things might not be the same, but there are some things I can do now that can help me rebuild or create a new life. And that would hopefully move them into feeling a little bit more hopeful.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And what about technology-based resources? Do you have any apps or other digital health resources that you recommend for people who've lived through a disaster or an act of mass violence?

Dr. Patricia Watson:

Yes, we have apps at the National Center for PTSD, like the PTSD Coach mobile app that has a lot of great resources for anyone who has experienced a traumatic stressor. They don't even need to identify as having PTSD, but in that app, we have ways to calm down, we have lists of people that you can call easily, different ways to cope with common trauma reactions and distress. We also have a version of that that's online that has 17 different tools to help you manage things like trauma reminders or sleep issues or other different types of stress reactions that could occur after a disaster. And there's a Family Coach version of this mobile app as well, which gives you tools to help you take care of yourself, but also strengthen your relationship with other loved ones who might've experienced the disaster as well.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Well, I think that's all we have time for today. Thank you so much for joining us, Dr. Watson, to talk about disasters and mental health.

Dr. Patricia Watson:

Thank you as well. It's been a pleasure to talk with you and I hope this is helpful for people who are listening.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And as a reminder to our listeners, PTSD coach and PTSD Family Coach can be found in the App store or Google Play and PTSD Coach online can be found at [www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/ptsdcoachonline](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/apps/ptsdcoachonline). And the Disaster Distress Helpline can be reached at 1-800-985-5990.

Dr. Andrea Jamison:

Hello, this is Andrea Jamison and I'm the executive producer of the PTSD Bytes podcast. Catch new episodes by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Show notes and more information are on our website, [www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast](http://www.ptsd.va.gov/podcast). Thank you for joining us.