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Guest:	Kelly Maieritsch
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Transcript

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Welcome to the PTSD Bytes podcast, brought to you by the Department of Veterans Affairs National Center for PTSD. In this series, we talk to experts about posttraumatic stress disorder and mental health, with a focus on free digital resources that can help. This is your host, Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport. On today's episode, we will be debunking some common PTSD myths. I'm joined today by Dr. Kelly Maieritsch, who is a clinical psychologist and the director of the PTSD Mentoring program, which supports PTSD specialty clinics throughout the VA. Welcome, Dr. Maieritsch.

Dr. Kelly Maieritsch:

Thanks for having me. I'm really excited to be here today.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Okay, so let's start with a really common myth, which is that only military Veterans or people in war zones get PTSD.

Dr. Kelly Maieritsch:

There are many types of different experiences that can impact people and that they may potentially lead to PTSD. Some of the different types of things are, in addition to combat, are physical assault, sexual assault. These can happen at different points in your life, so in childhood, in adolescence, in adulthood. They can happen inside the military, outside of the military, serious accidents that happen at work or in different places, and even exposure to different natural disasters, floods, hurricanes are just some of the types of experiences that may possibly lead to PTSD.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And what about the idea that everyone who goes through a traumatic event gets PTSD. Like everyone who's been in combat gets PTSD, is there any truth to that?

Dr. Kelly Maieritsch:

So, as I mentioned before, there are many different types of traumatic events that may lead to PTSD, but it isn't automatic. There's a lot of people that actually experience traumatic events and have a lot of different types of really expected reactions to those events. So, what I mean about expected is that after you go through something traumatic, you're going to expect that person to have reactions to it. And for example, when you go through something like that, you're likely going to be thinking about what just happened pretty frequently, maybe even possibly trying to make sense of why it happened. And you also are likely going to be having maybe increased anger or fear about what happened. Or you might find that you're having a hard time concentrating. These are all things that people go through as they try to make sense of the things that happen to them. Now, for most people, as they go through this process, those reactions start to decrease over time. And when we think about PTSD, what we see is that those expected reactions, they just don't decrease over time, and instead they lead to PTSD. Now,

there are a lot of different reasons for why this happens, but what's important to know, to your point, is that experiencing trauma does not automatically lead to PTSD.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah, something I hear a lot from my patients with PTSD is that they feel like they can't get past their trauma. And it really sounds like this is what you're talking about, the idea that traumatic events happen and it's really normal for people to feel upset or distressed or traumatized even after the fact. But when people struggle to recover after a few months, that's when it starts to become PTSD. Do I have that right?

Dr. Kelly Maieritsch:

Yeah, that's exactly right. It's really about the process that happens over time.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Now, another question, does PTSD always happen right after the traumatic event?

Dr. Kelly Maieritsch:

Ooh, great question. Uh, it can actually look different for different people. For some people, normal type reactions may slowly and steadily transition into stronger reactions. Ultimately, those stronger reactions also start to really negatively affect your day-to-day living. Now, for others, they may not have any reactions immediately, right, after the situation happens. It may only start to affect them a little bit later in time or later in life. A good example of this is when it happens in the context of work. So, let's take someone who's a firefighter or maybe that military person in combat. After their traumatic experience, they might have to go back and face similar situations again and pretty soon after. So, there's not that time immediately after to necessarily process and feel your feelings and because you have to get back in and potentially experience new things.

Now, there's another situation where maybe it's not short-term pushing it away, but long-term. One example are people that retire. What happens is for a lot of us, work and just the typical life demands, help us push away the memories and the feelings and the thoughts. And when work is there, it helps us distract and put our attention somewhere else. The struggle might be that even though you haven't had these reactions potentially for a long time, they will pop back up wanting to be addressed.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I think another common myth is that PTSD is a sign of weakness. There's this idea that you should be able to move on after a traumatic event. So what do you say to that?

Dr. Kelly Maieritsch:

The last thing I would think about PTSD or a person with PTSD struggling is that they are weak, or, and I'm going to put this in air quotes, that they "should have gotten over it." See, having PTSD, it doesn't mean you did something wrong. It honestly doesn't mean that someone doesn't desperately want to move on, as I think people suggest when they tell you, you should have just gotten over it. In fact, I would argue the opposite. Living with PTSD means that they are trying to manage their entire life – all the things that we do day-to-day. Now, add on top of that, that you have to worry about distressing memories of the most terrible experiences in your life popping up into your mind anytime during the day unexpectedly. Or, maybe finding yourself reacting suddenly and strongly when something triggers a

memory of that event. And then when you get through your entire day then you get to be again faced with dealing with possibly disturbing thoughts or nightmares that prevent you from getting the sleep you desperately need. People with PTSD take what we do on a daily basis and add all this other struggle on top of it, trying to keep that all together. And watching them continue to move forward, I will tell you that I personally think that people who are working with their PTSD are some of the most resilient people I have ever met, and I certainly would not label that weak.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Yeah, I have to agree with you on that one. Unfortunately, I also hear this myth or assumption that people with PTSD are somehow broken, and I think that the stereotype can be really hurtful to folks who are struggling with PTSD. So what do you think about this idea? Are people with PTSD broken?

Dr. Kelly Maieritsch:

So I'm not always sure what people mean exactly when they say that someone is "broken." You know, to me, that implies that a person is just no longer capable of doing anything or maybe they're just not capable of getting better. And there just isn't evidence to support that. We know, based on a lot of work, that people with PTSD can get better given the right type of help and the right type of support, so those types of absolute statements, are just not accurate when you look at what people who are dealing with PTSD are actually like. I would say if you really want a better understanding of the different ways that people actually experience and react to their, their traumas and their symptoms of PTSD, I would recommend checking out a website called "AboutFace." It's produced by the National Center for PTSD, and it includes videos in this case from Veterans, but who span like six decades of experiences, of different trauma types, different eras. And what this website does is it shares videos of them sharing their personal and heartfelt stories. You can also, on the same website, learn more about what treatment is like from the Veterans, as well as from treatment providers. And there's also videos from family and friends of people who have PTSD that can also share what it really is like being close with someone who's struggling with these symptoms.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

I'm so glad you mentioned AboutFace because I think some of these myths speak to the fact that most of us have an idea in our heads about what it looks like when someone has PTSD. There's this idea that everyone with PTSD has the same symptoms. So that leads me to my next question. Is that true that people with PTSD all have the same symptoms?

Dr. Kelly Maieritsch:

Absolutely not. I actually did a study in graduate school where I wanted to see how people reacted following the experience of sexual assault. And what I found is that in talking with people who had had similar types of experiences, that they really had very different responses afterwards. On the one hand, some people avoided physical contact and intimacy with anyone at all costs. They did not want to engage, they really became avoidant and did not want to connect to people. On the other end, I also talked to people who went the other direction pretty extremely, and they appeared to almost be more engaged physically than they were before the assault. And in diving deeper, what I found is that people have all kinds of reasons for why and how they react. I would strongly suggest against judging a book by its cover when it comes to someone dealing with trauma and the symptoms that they experience, and the way that they demonstrate how they're experiencing it. You really have little idea what is happening for that person or really any idea of why they deal with it the way that they do.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

Well said and a great note to end on. Dr. Maieritsch, thank you so much for joining us today.

Dr. Kelly Maieritsch:

Thank you very much for having me and allowing me the opportunity to dispel a few of these myths that I worry too many people carry. So really appreciate the opportunity.

Dr. Colleen Becket-Davenport:

And as a reminder to our listeners, you can check out stories from real Veterans at www.ptsd.va.gov/aboutface.

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.pts.va.gov/podcast. Thank you for joining us.