Understanding Trauma Exposure in Psychiatric Diagnosis: Opportunities in Alternative Diagnostic Approaches

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Abstract

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) occupies a central role in psychiatric diagnosis in the United States but does not account for patient narrative and experience. Alternate approaches such as the Cultural Formulation Interview (CFI) and the Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF) center patient's stories and understanding of their distress. This narrative review shows how the CFI and PTMF may illuminate divergent patient outcomes following a potentially traumatic exposure (PTE). Most people will experience a PTE during their lives, yet only a subset of these will suffer long-term mental health consequences including but not limited to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Interventions to decrease the burden of mental illness following a PTE rely on — primarily neurobiological — theories of the underlying pathogenesis of PTSD. These secondary prevention efforts cannot reliably interrupt the formation of PTSD. Ongoing attempts to illuminate the underlying, multifactorial etiology of PTSD and other mental illnesses require an infusion of just what the CFI and PTMF have to offer: an integration of people's understanding of their distress grounded in the context of their lives. People's narratives, while each distinct, may have their own patterns divergent from mere symptoms that could complement attempts to understand the roots of persistently poor mental health following PTE.