

THE POST-WAR: FIGHTING AGAINST SYMPTOMS

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Introduction:

After World War II, European countries were forced to promote the process of decolonization of different dominated areas. However, the Portuguese government did not accept an end to the colonies and as a result, nationalist movements were organized in several African countries to fight the war which became known as the Colonial War. For 13 years, violent conflicts affected the two continents, leaving marks on both sides of the war.

Colonial War remains a topic of interest of many researchers and health professionals in Portugal [1] [3] [4], mainly regarding the consequences on Portuguese veterans and their families. The young people sent to battlefields left the war more than 40 years ago, but they did not leave the memories behind.

Recognizing the scars of the Colonial War on the Portuguese veterans, and considering the late recognition of war trauma in Portugal which occurred in the year 1999 [8], this study aimed at investigating the obstacles faced by these veterans when seeking professional help. Did the physical and psychological symptoms lead them to treatment? Was the recognition of war trauma a trigger? What are the therapists' challenges in dealing with this population? Starting from these questions, the author of the current paper conducted a study for tracking the steps of the Portuguese veterans from post-war up to the sessions where they were receiving treatment.

Methods:

Through a traditional literature review, the access of the clinical data and interviews conducted on 11 Colonial War veterans enrolled at the Center for Prevention and Treatment of Psychogenic Trauma at the University of Coimbra Hospital, the main symptoms and challenges faced by Portuguese veterans to seek proper treatment were identified. Regarding the data from interviews, a thematic analysis [2] was performed to identify patterns of the themes addressed by this population.

Results:

Corroborating the literature review [1] [4] [7], the interviews indicated intrusive memories, startle reactions, decreased interest in social activities, sleep disturbance, nightmares, survivor's guilt, irritability, impaired memory and concentration as the main symptoms presented by the Portuguese veterans who faced the battle or did not face it at all, such as the veterans who faced the training or were in the military camp without exposure to combat.

Especially at night, I see the river, the muddy water and some terrible things. Sometimes I see his eyes, his eyes turning blue... (R., page 4, line 24 of his interview).

When I hear a siren, I am affected (P., page 2, line 1 of his interview).

Regarding the physical symptoms, the interviewed veterans reported impotence, chronic pain, functional alteration of the stomach, vertigo, headache and cough, conditions medically unexplained. As somatic patients, they admitted sought proper care when their bodies fall ill. As stated by other researchers [3] [6] [7], fear of stigma, the shame, the guilt, and the attempts to forget the war were the main reasons for the Portuguese veterans to deny their symptoms.

According to literature review, the difficulty in recognizing the signs of traumatic stress is usually a consequence of values learned in the military context and the thoughts and reactions of the social environment [5] [6]. Society expects soldiers to be brave and indestructible, and families demand care and guidance from them, mainly considering the veterans of the Colonial War and the expectations and conceptions at that time.

I cannot show these problems. If I talk about them, she [his wife] does not know how to deal with it, she does not want to know (J., page 8, line 18 of his interview).

When the Portuguese veterans arrive at the clinical offices, the health professionals need to remind the Colonial War history, as well as the discredit of the war trauma at that time. The cultural and social contexts are also relevant factors to conduct their treatments [5]. The interviewed veterans emphasized their need of sharing their experiences and memories, reporting the benefits to be treated through psychiatric consultations, individual therapy or even group therapy.

Conclusions:

The Portuguese veterans of the Colonial War are situated between the refusal of the diagnosis and the call for the renouncement of the stigma related to mental disease. The changes in the Portuguese laws and credibility, furthered by the media, regarding the symptoms of war trauma have led the population to think about and discuss this subject. Providing society with more knowledge about traumatic stress was essential to decrease social stigmatization and, thereby increase the seek for treatments by Portuguese veterans.

The current study also suggested that all therapies may promote psychological well-being and symptomatic relief, depending only on the veterans' ability to recognize and accept the influence of psychological and social factors, and understand the goals of treatment. Although the Portuguese veterans took so long to seek professional help, the psychiatric consultations have brought benefits for their health and social lives.

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