

What is the Impact of Acts of bravery?

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Abstract

Whilst the effects of exposure to trauma in the military and emergency services are now being more widely researched, recognised and understood, there is little research that looks at the impacts of bravery undertaken by civilians, which may include exposure to life threatening events. This is an area which we believe requires more research.

Keywords: Bravery; Heroism; Military; Emergency services; Civilians; Post traumatic stress disorder; Post traumatic growth

Commentary

We all like to hear positive stories of bravery and heroism, especially those that have a good ending and outcome. These stories reassure us that amongst all the bad news and tragedy we see on a daily basis, there are people out there who act and behave selflessly in extraordinary situations and circumstances.

We hear less about those rescues or acts of bravery where the outcome was neither positive nor successful, but regardless of whether or not an act of bravery succeeds, there is often a cost and, in some cases, an ongoing legacy for those involved. Although researchers have explored the impact of trauma on the military, police and emergency service workers, there is little research that explores the effects or consequences of acts of bravery on civilians. In particular, little is known about the effects of acts of bravery on civilians and significant other family members. Knowledge in this area is limited by the availability of basic descriptive data about the nature of recognized acts of bravery.

What Do We Know About Those Involved in Acts of Bravery?

Information is available about those who receive bravery awards. The Australian Bravery Award Scheme, for example, is the civilian equivalent to the Military Gallantry Awards and was introduced in 1975. Since its inception, up until 2015 there have been 4,212 bravery awards presented for acts of courage or bravery. Our analysis of a

sample of 1,468 citations of Australian bravery award recipients for the period 2007-2015 from the Australian Honors and Award Secretariat revealed that there were 239 (21.9%) deaths associated with an act of bravery. Thirty-five (3.2%) awards were made posthumously. In 204 (18.7%) incidents, a death other than that of the award recipient occurred. This highlights that acts of bravery performed by ordinary people can have unfortunate outcomes. The majority of award recipients 930 (63.4%) were civilians. Police officers received 270 (18.4%) awards with a further 268 (18.2%) of awards going to non-civilians (other emergency or military personnel during non-combat). Most award recipients were men (89%) with 162 (11%) awards going to women.

Trauma Responses to Acts of Bravery

While little research has explored the association between acts of bravery and trauma, there is substantial evidence supporting the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of trauma in those involved in active military service and in emergency service workers [1,2]. Given the nature of many acts of bravery, that in many cases are life-threatening, it is plausible that many bravery award recipients will experience significant trauma. However, for some, their experience and trauma may also be a positive and life changing experience, through post-traumatic growth associated with positive changes in self, a changed sense of relationships with others and a changed philosophy of life [3]. Clearly there is a need for further research that identifies the needs of this group.

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